Eagle's Prayer: Part One

VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete

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Eagle's Prayer: Part One

VraieEsprit

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This story was first published on April 16th, 2007, and was last updated on May 5th, 2007.

FicLab ID: _XeYakWr/m4g5gq0p/10700E581

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Summary

title	Eagle's Prayer: Part One
author	VraieEsprit
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3489722/
published	April 16th, 2007
updated	May 5th, 2007
words	68,798
chapters	14
status	Complete
rating	Fiction T
tags	Anime/Manga, Complete, Fanfiction, Fi/Fantasy, Sci, Tenchi Muyo

Description

Kihaku died a year ago, but when Washu disappears on her way home from Airai, Sasami is stricken with a strange vision of her friend engulfed in blue flame. Afraid for her safety, a search party is launched but how do you find a planet that isn't there?

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer

The Continuity continues. ;)

This story fits the same progressive timeline as the previous stories, and tacks on to the end of Tainted Spirit.

I was recently told that it's unusual for a fanfiction writer to write sequential stories in the way that I do — which surprised me. There's nothing more fun in my view than writing developments in characters and character bonds, just as you see in the TV series or read in books that serialise the events in the lives of specific characters. For my part, I've always written stories in this manner — although how far they will go and how many more there will be remains open-ended. I literally have no idea if there will be another story until after I finish the one before.

Such is life.

This story focuses in again on a couple of previously visited concepts, mainly of my own devising. In some respects, this story centres on Tokimi, Washu and their Kii heritage. Due to popular demand, a certain Lord of Jurai and a certain Galaxy Police Officer will find their detection team re-united in this fic, also :D. Tenchi and Ryoko are wound up in the midst of it, as ever. And I suspect there will be a role for the Juraian contingent — Sasami at the very least — just from the things I've already thought through.

Also in this story are appearing two characters from the original Tenchi continuities that I have not used before. I won't name names. You'll see who they are soon enough.

Boring Note on Vraie's Linguistics and Kii Names: (Skip this if you really don't care…)

Name suffixes/titles aside, I'm not going to attempt to type Japanese script or Japanese phrases into my work, to represent the language spoken in Japan. Despite the fact Tenchi et al are living in Japan and such like, "Common Galactic Tongue" for the purpose of my writing can probably be seen as English. (This is simply because my stories are written in English… though if you want to imagine them in Japanese, please be my guest!)

However, I must mention the occasional liberty taken in this story with certain words from the Japanese language. My character "Suki Tennan"'s name kanji (for anyone who cares) mean 'Revered Spirit' (崇気 ***Suu Ki***). However, the word "好き***suki***" in Japanese (or *s'ki* as it's generally pronounced) actually means "*like*" (and is often used by Japanese people to mean "*love*"). (My reason for mentioning this becomes clear as the story progresses. I'm not just a random nutball. Well, hrm, maybe I am, but anyhow — there is reason to my madness!)

Equally, the name meaning given to *Tokimi* in this story is based on the original three Kanji characters her name has in canon according to my sources — meaning, in sequence: "訪***To***" (Visit) "希***Ki***" (Rare or Aspiring) and "深, ***Mi***" (Deep) (at least according to my Kanji dictionary!). I have absolutely no idea why she was given this name or what it is meant to signify, if anything at all. However, I just wanted people to be aware this wasn't just my random babble!

More relevantly, the meaning of Washu's name (鷲羽 ***Washuu***) is "Eagle's Feather" — which is why Kihaku's emblem and deity are all based around the Eagle. I never explained that in a story before, but someone asked me about it a while back, so I thought for anyone who didn't know about Washu's name, I'd explain!

Anyone who's discussed Kihaku and the Kii language with me knows that — although it's not intended to BE Japanese, Kii is meant to resemble Japanese in some respects, as a sort of lip-service to Tenchi Muyo's country of origin. Hence this story may have the occasional Japanese reference when talking about the language of Kihaku!

(If you are getting boxes or?? before the names in bold, your PC is not configured for Japanese characters, hence why I've written the romanised form as well :))

Usual legal junk applies! Now I've bored you all to death with my anal language geekiness — let the story begin!!

Synopsis

It's been more than a year since the destruction of Kihaku marked the end of the planet's dark hold over Tokimi's heart, and the young Priestess is happily enjoying her life on the planet Jurai, blissfully ignorant of the bleak shadows that lurk in her past. The Kii are dead, after all — or are they? As Washu comes back from a visit to Airai, she spots a strange planet glowing in the bleak and as she sets down on its surface, she is startled to find engravings and monuments that appear to be carved in her

native tongue. But how can that be?

Meanwhile, Sasami has a strange vision which only Tokimi can interpret, and on the Earth, Ryoko and Tenchi get a surprise when Ryo Ohki returns to the planet — alone! Where is Washu and who are the strange people who have taken her prisoner? Determined to track her down, Ryoko and Tenchi set off to follow the coordinates into space, only to find no trace of the planet when they reach the right sector of space. Is the world real or an illusion? Wanting to help her friend, Sasami sends Seiryo to investigate Washu's strange disappearance, and Seiryo takes a wild gamble, choosing to bring Tokimi along for the ride as he seeks the assistance of the Galaxy Police in his quest.

But Tokimi alone understands the true nature of Sasami's vision, and the words written in the Juraian sands. And as they plunge deeper into space, Tokimi finds herself plagued by images of death and battle. Is she finally remembering her years as Kihaku's Priestess? Can she ever face up to her past — or will the dark thoughts rise up and overwhelm her once again?

EAGLE'S PRAYER: PART ONE
A Tenchi Muyo! Fanfiction
by
VRAIEESPRIT

Chapter One
The Borders of Solar System #9-814

Several Milennia Earlier

The lightning still split the sky over Kihaku.

From the belly of the powerful Juraian war-craft, the huddle of people watched with a mixture of fear and awe as the spinning orb of their planet drew further and further into the distance, still glowing from the wild bursts of the Priestess's magic that struck through the clouded atmosphere.

The World was angry.

In the midst of the ragged, unkempt gathering, a small girl pressed forward, pushing her small pudgy hands up against the glass window as she gazed out across the bleakness of space. Tears touched her eyes and she clasped her hands together, in imitation of the prayers she had seen her parents utter.

"There's no sense praying to the World now." A man jostled her, shaking his head in impatience at her behaviour. "Kihaku has forsaken us — all of us. Tokimi-sama is angry — the World has not forgiven us for making treaties with Jurai. We should have expected retribution — this is

our punishment. Our World has abandoned us. We are nothing more than Juraian prisoners, now."

"Refugees." A woman objected. "Jurai have taken us to save our lives, Masoto. Not to hurt us."

"Then you're naïve, if you believe that. As bad as this stupid child." Masoto shook his head, clenching his fists as he considered the situation. "We never had troubles till the Settlers came, you know that good as I do. The Lord Priest, Tokimi-sama's father, he knew we shouldn't trust their strange machines and false manners. Their Goddess sought to banish our own and the World is cross with us for even considering such things. We will be Jurai's slaves now. On a strange land, speaking a strange language — we are all that is left of Kihaku. Even the Priest's true heiress abandoned us. We have betrayed our World and we have only ourselves to blame."

"Such bitterness." Another man sighed, stretching out against the glass as Kihaku became no more than a distant blip on the horizon, one of many dots that marked the planets in that solar system. "Why not do something about it then, Masoto? You complain much, but do little to help our situation. If Ameki's prayers to the World are useless, you're scarcely any better. Let the child pray, and leave the rest of us in silence."

"No, Masoto has a point." A second woman pursed her lips, drawing herself into a sitting position as she contemplated. "We are all that is left of Kihaku's people. We have been subdued and imprisoned by the Settlers — can any of us really believe their intentions towards us are good? They've surged into our world, stolen the heart of our planet and driven the holy tribe against us. The true heiress has disappeared, driven away by tainted magic. Tokimi-sama is the World's will and she seeks to rid Kihaku's surface of Juraian influence. Surely that should be enough to tell us what the World truly wants? The Juraians should never have come to Kihaku. And if we continue to believe in their false goodwill and their apparent generosity, we will all be subjugated under their laws for all eternity. That is not the way of the Kii! We are not so easily beaten down. Why should we speak their language, wear their clothes, eat their food? We are not of Jurai. Why should we forget the World's way, even if the World is angry at us? Perhaps, if we show how penitent we truly are, there might yet be hope for us all."

"The Hakubi tribe no longer holds sway over the World." Masoto said firmly. 'Tokimi-sama was forced into the World's service because of the threat to Jurai. She was not worthy blood and yet our people initiated her as Priestess anyway. Tokimi-sama is an Inoue. Not a Hakubi. A survivor of a tribe wiped out by famine and inter-familial squabbling. The World is not

fooled by her, even if she did call the old Priest "Father'."

"What else could we do?" The first woman objected. "There was no other. Tokimi-sama knew the ritual. Who else could we choose?"

"The Priest's daughter, perhaps?" Masoto suggested. "You must realise, Rei, that we only have rumour to suggest that Washu-sama is dead. She disappeared. Perhaps swallowed by the World in sacrifice or punishment for our deeds — noone really knows. But if we could find her…"

"If we could find her, what?" The other man demanded, sitting upright against the window as he glared at his companion. "We're on our own. We're miles from Kihaku now, on this devil-contraption of theirs. What do you suggest we do about it?"

"Ah." Masoto's eyes narrowed, and he cast a gaze thoughtfully out of the window. "We are not weak, are we, my brothers and sisters? We are of many tribes, true, but we are all Kii, are we not?"

"Yes." The man acknowledged warily. "But what of it? The World no longer protects us. What can we do, trapped out in space?"

"We can stand up for ourselves and show those Juraian heretics what's what." The second woman got to her feet. "I understand your meaning, Masoto. You think that we should band together. Forget our tribal rivalries and tensions and combine our wills into one end — gaining freedom from Jurai whilst we have an opportunity. We are not locked in, after all. We are refugees, as Rei said. Not prisoners of war — not yet. But many of us are fighters. Most of us have some training in defending our land and our property from unwanted Settler attention. If we were to work together…"

She trailed off, and Rei's eyes opened wide with alarm.

"You think we should attack the Settlers? On their own ship?" She whispered. The woman nodded her head.

"Precisely that." She said firmly. "And avenge our World's disgrace, once and for all. We may be all that's left, but if we go to Jurai, we will be swallowed up by their world and their culture. The Kii will cease to exist altogether, our planet dead, our Priestess forced into dormancy and decay. Our lives are never going to be the same again, true, but we can still keep our values and know our own minds. Or do you wish to be subjugated before the Goddess of the Tree? Serve her will — the will of the Hawk, instead of that of the Eagle?"

"Amari is right." Masoto agreed. "The time for action is now. While they don't expect it. Kill the Settlers and take control for ourselves."

"And how will we get back to Kihaku? None of us understand how this

Settler technology works." Rei objected.

"We'll manage." Masoto said grimly. "For the sake of the World, Rei, we must do this. We must liberate the last of our people, and keep the Kii spirit alive."

"Yes." Amari murmured. "After all, better to burn out brightly than flicker and fade into oblivion. Enough of our people have already betrayed us. Some have already chosen Juraian names, and married into Juraian families. We are the last hope for Kihaku, and we must do all we can to maintain that ideal."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Even if we die, such a fate is better than being forced to betray the World yet again. Come, my brothers and sisters. Let us join forces and forget our differences in light of a greater, truer ideal. In the name of the Eagle of Kihaku — in the name of the World which our people have always served — let us fight for our freedom — or die in the attempt!"

Chapter 2

Chapter Two
Deep Space
Several Thousand Years Later.

"You know, you really are getting much better at this."

Seiryo Tennan leant back against the wall of his ship, eying his companion with a wry smile as he observed the growing pile of scrap paper that had become scattered across his desk. "I have to admit that I'm impressed. Such ciphers might not be the most difficult but they're by no means simple to decode. Yet you've more or less got the basics down in next to no time."

"Well, when I put my mind to something, I do my best to get it done." His companion pushed her chair back, meeting his glance with a triumphant grin. "And there's more to being an Elite Agent than just running around spaceships. Since our confrontation with Yugi Kuroda, I've been dying to get my hands on some encryption work… it's so frustrating when everything is in code and if I'd been able to read the ciphers then, we would have broken the case sooner. I'm glad you gave in and let me play with the Unko's decoder, Seiryo… I really appreciate the time."

"Well, it saves me from anything more energetic." Seiryo said, amused. "Kiyone, your work ethic continues to amaze me. Since we began these secret training sessions four months ago, you've already come on leaps and bounds. It really is a criminal waste of your ability, keeping you down in the Regular division. Mihoshi-san should be grateful — if she knew what you were giving up to stay partnered with her…"

"Mihoshi isn't the kind of Detective who can be left to work alone." Kiyone Makibi grimaced, shaking her head slowly at the mention of her scatterbrained partner. "And besides, it's sort of fun this way. Being trained without all the red tape, I mean. I didn't know what it would be like — you can be full of yourself, sometimes, and I figured you'd be a hard task-master. But you're also a pretty good teacher — I admit it, you've taught me a lot even in the last few months. Maybe you missed your calling after all. Perhaps you should have followed in the footsteps of Mihoshi's father and taught Elite techniques at the Galaxy Police Academy."

“I don’t think I could bear it.” Seiryo grimaced. “I was eighteen when I joined the Force, and underwent basic training. But some of the youngest recruits are fifteen or sixteen. Can you imagine me in charge of a group of teenagers? I don’t think so. I’d lose my patience sooner than my sanity, stuck in that environment day after day.”

Kiyone smirked.

“Perhaps you *do* lack the patience.” She agreed critically. “But not all sixteen year olds are hopeless cases. I started my Police career at sixteen, you know.”

“No offence meant, I’m sure.” Seiryo held up his hands in mock surrender. He came to stand behind her, scanning his gaze across the screen, then nodding his head approvingly. “You certainly have the hang of the software, that’s for sure. It’s just a shame that you’re so limited in your background education.”

“Excuse me?” Kiyone wheeled on him, surprised indignation in her blue eyes. “What kind of a remark is that?”

“A true one.” Seiryo leant across her, flicking his fingers across the keys, and a new screen flashed up on the monitor. “Tell me. What do you make of that?”

“Is this another cipher?” Kiyone eyed him suspiciously. Seiryo shook his head.

“No. Not at all.” He responded, tapping a sequence of keys again and standing back. “What about this one? Is that any clearer?”

“No.” Kiyone admitted. “What are they, anyway?”

“News reports.” Seiryo said with a slight smile. “The first was written in pure Seniwan. The second in Old Era Juraian.”

“Oh.” Kiyone sighed, resting her chin in her hands as she gazed at the screen. “That’s what you meant. I don’t have any other languages under my belt. The planet I’m from has only ever used Galactic Tongue, at least in living memory. And I never learnt any other at school. Heck, I was lucky I *stayed* at school till I was sixteen, to be honest. I never really had that option.”

“That’s what I suspected.” Seiryo owned. “Many cultures now are losing their own languages in favour of Galactic Tongue. Whilst its useful for communication purposes, it seems somewhat sad. And certainly, from the perspective of an Elite Officer of the Galaxy Police, it’s practically criminal. There’s no way you can rank highly in encryption without at least one of the commonly encoded languages

under your belt. And few organisations will sanction coding done in Galactic Tongue. Far too easy to break."

"I see." Kiyone frowned. "I never thought of it like that before. How many languages do you speak, Seiryo?"

"Three." Seiryo grinned. "The three we've just been discussing. All of Jurai's noble class learn Old Era Juraian as standard — well, there are still political texts and documents drafted and written in that language, even though it is largely an ancient tongue and rarely spoken. And Seniwan, because Jurai and Seniwa have long since been allies. You should speak to your partner, Kiyone. I'm sure Mihoshi-san must speak some of her native tongue as well as Galactic Tongue."

"Not so much." Kiyone shook her head. "Her parents do, and her brother also. But Mihoshi's is basic at best. It's like you said. Cultures adopt the common language and don't keep up with their own. And Mihoshi's not exactly a gifted academic. She never really grasped it, when most of the people around her weren't speaking it."

She grimaced.

"So what do you suggest? Take a crash course in a second language?" She asked helplessly. "It's a bit late to begin grabbing dictionaries and study books now, you know. And well, the two languages you showed me don't even use the same alphabets."

"No, they don't." Seiryo agreed. "But you have a smart mind, Kiyone. If you can learn to see them as symbols rather than words, maybe you can learn to think your way around it."

"I don't follow."

"It doesn't matter. For now, we'll leave it alone." Seiryo decided. "You've already been here for nearly three hours as it is, and your Commander will be suspicious if the Yagami is out of dock for much longer on your night off. Especially since Mihoshi-san is back at Headquarters."

"Mihoshi should be asleep in bed." Kiyone said acidly. "At least, that's what I hope. The less she knows about these sessions of ours, the better. I can feel that I'm already improving, and that's a good thing — but if she knew, the whole of Headquarters would find out in hours. And that's not really what I want. The Commander has a very dim view of you still, and I don't want him to decide I'm still suffering from 'mental stress'."

"That was some time ago now, though." Seiryo pointed out. Kiyone shrugged.

“He can be overly protective of his officers, if he feels they’re in trouble.” She said with a sigh. “It’s annoying and reassuring, but mostly annoying.”

Seiryo laughed, nodding his head.

“I can see that.” He reflected. “Like me, you like to think things out for yourself.”

“Yes.” Kiyone confirmed. She got to her feet, stretching her arms over head as she stifled a yawn. “Staring at a screen is more tiring than it looks, you know. I guess I was concentrating harder than I thought.”

“Then I can offer you a drink, before you leave.” Seiryo suggested. Kiyone shrugged, then nodded her head.

“All right.” She agreed. “Though honestly, should I be wasting your time sitting around your ship sipping tea? You have six thousand things to do on Jurai, as well as my responsibilities at Headquarters. Won’t people think it’s odd that the Unko is out in space?”

“No.” Seiryo said calmly. “Sasami-sama knows that I’m training you.”

“She does?” Kiyone looked startled, as the nobleman led the way into the ship’s living quarters, indicating for her to sit down as he began to make tea. “I didn’t realise.”

“Sasami-sama is my liege lord. Or well, lady.” Seiryo pursed his lips, considering his words. “In either case, I’m her vassal and her advisor — in some ways I’m more associated with her than I am with Lord Azusa or Lady Ayeka. And she rarely misses a trick. She approves of it, in any case. She thinks its a good thing that you and I have become friends, considering our past encounters. And she encourages that all the way.”

“I see.” Kiyone smiled, nodding her head. “I suppose that makes sense. Though I haven’t told anyone anything. I thought that it would seem weird.”

“Sasami-hime is a very understanding mistress.” Humour sparkled briefly in Seiryo’s malachite eyes as he remembered his Princess’s reaction to the news. “So you needn’t worry. If anyone questions my absence, she will simply say that it’s with her knowledge and blessing.”

“Thank her for me.” Kiyone grinned. “Although in truth we’ve not managed to fit in as many secret sessions as I’d have liked, with one

thing and another. Jurai really does keep you busy, and well, my own workload can be oppressive. This is the first time since you came back from Yousai that we've even managed to get together."

"Yes." A faint shadow touched Seiryo's expression at this, and Kiyone frowned, eying him keenly.

"What's up?" She questioned, as the nobleman set a mug of steaming tea down in front of her, sitting opposite and taking a slow sip from his own mug. "I thought that everything worked out on that visit, in the long run. From what was reported on the Galactic News, it's a safe place again now, and the young Lady of Yousai was crowned without incident. Why the dark looks, Seiryo? I don't understand."

"I suppose not." Seiryo swirled his tea thoughtfully, setting it down on the unit. He shrugged. "I suppose everything did go well, in the end. But I still feel somewhat responsible for Yurikage Motonoya's untimely death. That's all."

"I thought that Lord Motonoya was something of a hothead?" Kiyone raised an eyebrow. "I remember that before you even left for Yousai, you were commenting to me on his lack of discretion and composure around Sasami. It sounds to me like he got himself killed. Why would that be your fault?"

"I should have taken him in hand sooner, I suppose." Seiryo reflected.

Kiyone snorted.

"Don't be stupid. He was a grown man. He was responsible for his own actions."

"Well, he died protecting Lady Sasami's life." Seiryo said simply. "And if I'd listened to him more closely from the start, I might have been more aware of danger myself. I'll never know if Yurikage's fixation with Sasami-sama's safety was his overzealous nature or whether he had some inkling or premonition of trouble. Having seen and heard about his strange sword, I really don't know what to believe. But I do feel that the young fool lost his life needlessly. And that I should have curbed his enthusiasm rather than laughed at it. I was in charge of the party, after all. His death is my responsibility — I was the one who had to make report to the Emperor and explain what went wrong."

"Does Lord Azusa blame you, then?" Kiyone asked quizzically, taking a sip of her drink as she eyed him thoughtfully. Seiryo shook

his head.

“No.” He admitted. “He said that Yurikage died in the carrying out of his duty, and that his death was an honourable act of preservation towards Princess Sasami. He’s been honoured as a hero and a loyal subject of Jurai, and his family can take pride in his actions, once the grief has begun to fade. But I don’t know. He *was* so young, really. Younger than Lady Ayeka, even. And I feel I let him down. That’s all.”

“You know, you take too much on yourself, sometimes.” Kiyone said frankly, pushing the mug aside and resting her chin in her hands. “You want to control everything and you can’t. It’s arrogant as much as anything, you know — assuming everything rests ultimately with you. It doesn’t necessarily work that way.”

“Sympathy isn’t high on your list of attributes, Kiyone, is it?” Seiryo raised an eyebrow, and Kiyone pulled a face.

“I’m just saying.” She said with a shrug. “The world doesn’t revolve around you and your decisions. Yes, it’s sad that this guy died. And it’s even sadder, the way his death came about. But honestly, Seiryo, you’re just one man. Sasami is the Goddess and even *she* wasn’t able to save him. There’s no reason for you to feel to blame. Things happen when you’re so wrapped up in dangerous political situations. Heaven knows I’ve seen my share of them in recent years. Your trouble is that you get a complex that you can save the world — I’ve seen it before and it’s as reckless as this Yurikage-sama’s hot-headed defence of Sasami. If you want to think anything about his death, think about learning from it and thinking before *you* act.”

“Consider me scolded.” Seiryo said dryly, holding up his hands, and Kiyone grinned sheepishly.

“Okay, so I’m maybe being a bit harsh.” She owned. “But it’s true, all the same. I mean, that you care he died, that’s a good thing. It would be weird and kind of callous if you didn’t. After all, you did know him, and better than many. However, I’m sure that Lord Motonoya would be the last one to lay the blame at your door. There’s really no need for you to take it to heart.”

“Perhaps.” Seiryo looked thoughtful. He sighed, draining the remains of his tea. “I take rather too much to heart these days, that much is true.”

“What does that mean?” Kiyone frowned. Seiryo started, then shook his head, a rueful look entering his malachite eyes.

“It doesn’t matter.” he said simply. “You came here to train. Not be

burdened with my ramblings. And it really is getting late."

"It is." Kiyone acknowledged, finishing her own drink and getting to her feet. "So I should probably be heading off, you're right."

She set the mug down on the unit of the small ship's kitchen, then paused, turning to meet her companion's gaze.

"We're friends, right?" She asked softly. Seiryo started, then nodded his head.

"I think so." He agreed evenly. "Why?"

"Mihoshi and I are also friends." Kiyone said thoughtfully. "And she doesn't think twice about burdening me with her ramblings, as you put it. It's all right, you know. I know you're not made of steel. I've seen your weaknesses before and I've seen you struggle against Tokimi's magic and the effects it left on your body. Don't think that because you're healed now that you have to play the invincible noble again. It won't wash with me, and I'd rather you didn't."

"I don't understand." Seiryo looked blank, and Kiyone sighed.

"You're overdosing on some of that Juraian court ego again." She said frankly. "All I'm saying is, Seiryo, if you have a problem and you can't tell your friends, well, either your friends suck or you do. That's all."

She shrugged her shoulders, flashing him a smile.

"And I'll be going. Thanks for the training and the tea — and I'll see you soon, no doubt. Just let me know when you can fit me in next."

With that she was gone, and Seiryo got slowly to his feet, rinsing out his tea mug as he pondered her words.

"Maybe." He acknowledged. "She never does mince her words. But then again, burdening is not something I do. People are different. Mihoshi-san shares her problems and her thoughts. I can fight with mine better when I keep them inside. And besides, Kiyone's already been hurt once because I let my raw ambition and pride be taken in by Kihaku's black magic. I think it's better for everyone if I don't fall victim to that particular evil again"

He grimaced, setting the mug down on the drainer.

"After all, just because I feel it, doesn't mean I have to show it." He added. "I might not be quite the same man as I was before Tokimi possessed me, and Yurikage's death may have affected me more than the deaths of twenty officers I crossed paths with during my time at

the Galaxy Police Elite. But I've learnt that some things need to be kept in hand, else they rail out of control and cause hurt to the people around me. Kiyone means well, but she doesn't understand that being Lady Sasami's advisor and a Councillor of Jurai doesn't permit time for that kind of weakness."

A smile twitched at the corner of his lips as he made his way back to the study.

"But she is making quick progress, even if she is hampered by her education." He admitted out loud, casting a brief glance down at the scrappy notes his companion had made as she had worked through each example diligently and neatly. "At this rate, she'll be equal to the Elite in no time, even if she is not permitted to use the title or the badge!"

"You know, thinking back to it now, it hardly seems real."

Sakura Ito settled herself down on the balcony of the small Osaka apartment, taking a sip of her cool drink as she watched the sun slowly setting over the city horizon. "Everything has gone back to normal, and it's like none of it even ever happened. I swear, if I tried to tell my sister or my parents where we went, they just wouldn't believe me."

"Well, now you know how I feel." Her companion shot her a wry smile, mock-toasting her with his own glass as he leant up against the railings opposite. "Ever since Ryoko and the others crashed into my life, pretty much everything that happens has a slightly surreal twist. In a way, it's nice to know that you and Ikeda have experienced that side of things, now. At least then I know that I'm not losing my mind, even if it seems that way."

"Space is beautiful." Sakura owned. "And that Jurai planet was something else. I have to admit, if the opportunity arose to go back there, I probably would. I mean, so long as it was all quiet and all. I've surprised myself feeling that way — when we got back here, I was so sure I'd never want to leave the Earth again. But now, after some time's passed… I'm not sure. It seemed so pretty, and unlike anything here on the Earth. And it has made me see things in a new light. That there aren't just countries full of people, but planets. People who think and feel just like we do. It's mind-blowing, but it's true all the same."

"Even so, there's nowhere I'd rather be than safe at home in Japan." Tenchi said pensively, turning his mind back to the madcap events that had led him and his friends on a wild goose chase through

space. “In the week since we’ve been back, nothing unusual or alarming has happened, and that suits me fine. Planet hopping is all very well, but it’s definitely more Ryoko’s domain than mine.”

“I think I understand Ryoko a little better now, too.” Sakura owned, offering him a playful grin. “And what it is that binds the two of you so closely together. It put her in context, if you like. On the Earth sometimes she seems to stick out — she doesn’t know certain traditions or conventions, and her magic sets her aside from most average Earthlings. But out there, in space, it was like she was in her element. When it came to facing down that Goddess girl, when she’d been possessed… she didn’t even think twice about launching herself into the fray. I think I gained a new respect for her, when that happened. And for you too, actually. The way you wielded that sword — it was almost out of a fairy tale.”

“Well, it wasn’t my weapon of choice, but thankfully it helped.” Tenchi said thoughtfully. “In the last few years I’ve truly learnt why it is Grandpa taught me so obsessively about wielding sticks and blades. It’s really come in handy, being able to utilise those techniques. It’s like Najya-san said — it’s not just the weapon but the force behind it. I guess I learnt a whole lot from Jii-chan’s instruction, even more than I realised.”

“Ikeda’s headed back north to see his family… his father’s birthday is this Friday and he thought he’d better go. I think it’s a fiftieth, or something like that.” Sakura drained her glass. “So I know why it is he’s not here. What I don’t understand is why you and Ryoko are in Osaka this weekend. I would have thought, with term so far away still, you’d be taking your chance to enjoy the peace and quiet of the mountains.”

“Peace and quiet?” Tenchi raised an eyebrow. “You’ve stayed at my house, Sakura. Do you really think peace and quiet are on offer at the Masaki shrine, seriously?”

“Well, perhaps not.” Sakura grinned, looking sheepish. “So is that it, then? Lover’s retreat to the city?”

“Yes and no.” Tenchi agreed. “I mean, it’s not a lover’s retreat exactly, although Ryoko will probably tell you it is. We just wanted some space after everything that happened. More often than not of late, when something drastic has occurred, we’ve been separated by one thing or another. And we’re both getting a little sick of it. This is a chance to spend some time together — out of the firing line of any potential enemy. At least, that’s the hope.”

He grimaced, amusement flickering in his brown eyes.

“And Ryoko wanted to buy sake from a particular store, so she decided we should make a trip of it.” He added. “She should be back soon. It’s a shame Ikeda isn’t around — but I think we should probably drink to the fact we all came back from that little adventure unscathed. There were a lot of times when I thought we might not.”

“Me too.” Sakura owned. “And you know I’m always glad when you’re in the city. It’s boring and dull when you’re all away home — it sucks being the only one who lives right on top of the university.”

“I thought you were moving places. Setting up on your own.”

“That is the plan.” Sakura agreed. “At least, I’ve been looking into a couple of ads in recent months, seeing if I can sort something out. I sort of hoped that you and Ryoko and Ikeda might not be too far spread, after graduation, although I’m coming to realise that you belong to the whole universe and could end up anywhere at any given time.”

“Not as much as you might think.” Tenchi shook his head. “Though it is nice to just take Ryo Ohki and fly through the stars from time to time. Once you’re used to the space altitude and everything — and the speed. And so long as you don’t have anyone chasing you… it can be fun.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Sakura admitted, resting her chin in her hands. “To be honest, I’m curious to meet more people from outside, now. True, Seiryo Tennan didn’t make a great first impression on me or on the Earth, and I still don’t know how I feel about him… he did let us hide out on his ship, so I suppose he might be all right. But Lord Imada and your cousins Ayeka and Sasami seemed sweet enough. And Misao, too — poor little kid. There must be others in the universe like them.”

“Yes, and many of them.” Tenchi nodded. “I admit, most of my travelling has been to Jurai. But I’ve met people from other places. Mihoshi, one of our Galaxy Police friends, she comes from a planet called Seniwa. Her partner Kiyone — I don’t even know what world she originated on, to be honest. Washu, of course, is Kii, and so is her sister, Tokimi. People travel far more from planet to planet than you might expect. Especially if they are politically allied in some way.”

“Washu-san is hard to make out.” Sakura said thoughtfully. “She seems nice enough, but…”

“Washu is harmless, though she’d like you to believe she isn’t.”

Tenchi grinned. “I’ve known her long enough now to realise that it’s a trait she and Ryoko both share — hiding their real feelings behind distraction techniques. Washu’s had a hard life, Sakura, and a long one, too. She’s been hunted by despot Princes, imprisoned by scientific colleagues, and almost everyone who was ever dear to her died in some way or another. She’s been alone a very long time, and it’s affected her, in more ways than one. For a long time, she even disguised herself as a child, as if she was trying to hide the fact she was an adult with responsibilities to face. I think she’s been lonely, that’s all. And now she isn’t, little by little, she’s changing. Maybe it’s crazy, but I think she’s showing more of her real self now than she ever has.”

“Maybe she’s put that long past behind her, and moved on.” Sakura suggested. “When we were on Jurai, Tenchi, I asked her about it. About what it was like to live so long and whether she ever got bored of it. She said there had been times… but she didn’t elucidate and I didn’t like to push her. I got the feeling there was sadness in her background — but she doesn’t seem the sort of person who dwells.”

“Not outwardly, no.” Tenchi shook his head. “Internally, it’s hard to know. In a lot of ways, she’s the last of her kind. Her people died out millennia ago, and with the exception of her sister, she’s the only one who remembers the way life used to be there. The language, the culture — all of those things. I think she tried to forget who she was, for a long time. But now she’s accepting it more… I’ve noticed that she doesn’t mind being called Kii any longer, and considering how reluctant she was to even open up to us about it in the first place, that’s a big step.”

“Her whole planet died out?” Sakura’s gaze softened. “Poor Washu-san. Everyone?”

“Everyone.” Tenchi confirmed, nodding his head. “I don’t understand all of it, but I know the planet turned on its people somehow, and killed the whole population. Washu felt that she could have stopped it from happening — and maybe she could, but we’ll never know for sure. Either way, she couldn’t have known what would happen, when she chose to leave.”

“One person can’t have that much impact on life and death — can they?” Sakura looked doubtful. Tenchi shrugged.

“You’ve met Tsunami. Or should I say, Sasami.” He reminded her. “Her life force controls all of Jurai’s energy, ecology and prosperity. Yes, Sakura, I think one person can have that much impact. Especially in light of recent events.”

“You know, you two really are boring this evening.”

Before Sakura could reply, a fresh voice broke through the conversation, and Ryoko flickered and blurred into view, perching neatly on the balcony railing as she dropped a bag down into an empty outdoor chair. “There. I had to queue for ages, and when I come back, you’re psychoanalysing my mother and discussing the physics of the universe. Do we have to be so heavy? Washu’s brain is a scary place, and believe me, we’re all better off not going there.”

“Ryoko.” Tenchi grinned at her, as she hopped daintily down onto the balcony itself. “We were only talking. I was trying to help Sakura understand. That’s all.”

“And as I said, it’s just not possible.” Ryoko said pragmatically, settling herself on Tenchi’s knee as she reached across to open her bag. “Besides, I brought sake. I thought we were celebrating Sakura’s first trip into the beyond, not holding an impromptu university seminar on universal properties.”

Sakura laughed.

“I guess you’re right.” She said good-naturedly. “But this is a big thing for me, Ryoko. Understanding that part of your lives. It might be routine for you to go space flying, but it’s all been a big adventure for me.”

“But you lived to tell the tale, and that’s always a good sign.” Ryoko offered her a grin, looping her arm around her fiance’s neck as she did so. “You never know, when you get wound up in Jurai’s politics, just what the outcome will be.”

“Kura was saying she’d like to go back to Jurai, one day.” Tenchi eyed her speculatively, and Ryoko snorted.

“You’re nuts.” She said categorically. “Believe me, I’ve been to umpteen galaxies and seen many, many planets. Jurai think they’re special, but they’re really not.”

“I thought it was beautiful, even if things were in decline, when we were there.” Sakura said pensively. “It’s still a novelty to me.”

“With Jurai, the novelty fades quickly.” Ryoko said frankly. “If not for Sasami and I guess, Ayeka, I wouldn’t go near Jurai at all.”

“Yes you would, because I’d ask you to.” Tenchi’s eyes twinkled. “Stop throttling me, will you? You’re hurting my neck doing that.”

“So what are you guys planning for this week, then, now that you’re here?” Sakura asked curiously. “Aside from tonight — do you

have plans?”

“Not really. We’re winging it.” Ryoko shook her head. “Washu’s taken my spaceship to go see Najya on Airai, so we can’t exactly go upwards. We’ll probably wind up staying in Osaka for a while, get some time away from the madness in the mountains.”

“Washu has flown Ryo Ohki a lot lately.” Tenchi reflected. Ryoko grimaced.

“I know, and I don’t like it.” She owned. “But she did invent Ryo Ohki, and the trouble is, Ryo Ohki doesn’t seem to mind. So I don’t see what I can really do about it. Either way, it gets Washu out of our hair for a while, and if Ryo Ohki isn’t on the Earth, we don’t have a chaperone to stop us behaving badly.”

“You have me.” Sakura teased. Tenchi laughed.

“Believe me, you’re probably safer out of it.” He bantered, casting his fiancee a sidelong glance.

“And you think you’re going to marry me, with an attitude like that?” Ryoko shot him a soulful glance, meeting his dark eyes with hurt amber ones. Tenchi grinned.

“Yes.” He agreed calmly. “It’s the best survival technique I have.”

“You two crack me up.” Sakura laughed. “You’re like no other couple I’ve ever met, you know. And not just because Ryoko flies and stuff. I don’t know what it is. Just something you guys have. It’s hard to put my finger on it, but it’s there all the same.”

“Well, we’re soulmates.” Ryoko told her simply. “That’s all. Tenchi and I were meant to be. I just had to stick around till he gave in and admitted that I was right. I’m persistant, and at the end of the day, he has sense. He didn’t resist.”

“Oh, so that’s how it was.” Tenchi teased. “I thought it was a conversation on Jurai when you spilled your heart to me under the influence of truth serum?”

Ryoko flushed at the memory, and Sakura smiled.

“It’s all right.” She said with a shrug. “I think the both of you are sweet. And I’m looking forward to when you do set a date. I have a feeling that a wedding involving a space pirate might be something to see!”

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

"I really should have come to Airai sooner."

Washu leant up against the wall of the burial chamber, running her fingers absently along the edge of the black, dusty funeral bier as she did so. "There's so much here to excite the imagination, and so much that just hasn't been understood. This is really where you slept, Najya-chan? When you fled from Kagato's men?"

"I had no choice." Her companion offered her a rueful smile, nodding her head and sending shimmers of magic through her gleaming silver hair as she did so. "I was a little bit out of options. Kagato knew that I knew too much about him, and he was determined to kill me. I didn't know how much he knew about Arian magic, and I didn't stick around to find out whether he knew how to kill a divided spirit. I brought myself home, and entrusted the second half of my soul to Aya and my family. Then I let go of my life force and allowed them to seal the rest of me here — to all appearances dead. When Kagato's men arrived, they saw my body for themselves… I'd died of the injuries inflicted by Kagato's weapon and they believed me no longer a threat. What they didn't know is that I was only dormant. But it took a lot of my strength to do it… and I wasn't sure if I'd ever wake up. Certainly not before my father passed on — saying goodbye to him was the hardest thing, because I knew that whatever else happened, I'd never speak to him again."

"I'm sorry." Washu looked contrite, turning away from the bier as she digested her companion's words. "I'm here looking at all of this as a scientist, but this is real life to you. Family… it must have been difficult."

"Yes." Najya agreed. "But in a sense, I brought it on myself. I took risks, being on Jurai even after I knew Kagato's intentions. So there it is. The tragic history of the Akara."

"It really is fascinating." Washu admitted. "That your people have essentially cheated death for generations by using spells and incantations. I've heard so many rumours about Arians rising from the dead and being difficult to kill… but I never thought I'd see a breathing example for myself."

“We can’t rise from the dead.” Najya looked amused, shaking her head as she took her friend by the hand, leading her carefully back up the stone stairway towards the surface. “I was never actually dead, Washu. Half of my spirit was sealed with Aya, remember? I was in stasis, if you want to use a scientific term. I didn’t age, or breathe, or move, and I have no memories of my time down here — not until I awoke and remembered all that had happened. But I was never fully dead. If I had been, then I would not have woken again. It’s not as mysterious as it sounds. Dividing our souls is a big part of Arian defensive magic, after all. It’s just a continuation of that principle.”

“So, if a man was to be slain, say, in an instant.” Washu said thoughtfully, as they stepped out onto Airai’s stone lined walkways. “Would that make him fully dead, if his spirit somehow lingered beyond that moment?”

“I would say he was dead, yes.” Najya looked surprised. “Why? Are you thinking of Kagato? I’ve heard the story of Souja’s tree… he must have transferred his soul there before his body fully stilled in death. Otherwise he wouldn’t have managed to survive at all.”

“No, not Kagato specifically.” Washu shook her head. “I’m just trying to understand. Some months ago, Ryoko encountered an old pirate acquaintance who seemed able to live on the essence of her memories, even though he was long since dead. I was wondering how that was possible. He was Arian, and I wanted to know if it was a part of your cultural magic. I believe he had some native power, but he wasn’t an Akara or a Saotome, as far as I know.”

“He was dead, Washu.” Najya grinned. “I know you’re a scientist, but there are such things as ghosts and spirits too, you know. You don’t have to be Arian to have a soul linger after death. The difference is that I am alive now as I was before. Whole and complete in my being and my memories. This man of yours — you said that he lived on Ryoko’s memories? That isn’t life.”

“I suppose not.” Washu acknowledged. “I was just curious.”

She spread her hands.

“Airai will command your attention, now, but it’s a shame you won’t get to go back to the Academy and write some papers on Arian magic for ignorants like me.” She said flippantly. “I think the whole Universe could use a better understanding of Airai’s power.”

“I don’t think they’d allow me back.” Najya looked rueful. “Like you, I concealed my true self from them. I didn’t get the capsule treatment, but I’m sure I would have been banished, once they

realised who and what I was. No, I'm better off here, like you're happier on your Earth. I must make time to visit you, when everything here is calmer and I can take some time to leave. That's the thing about being a Mage. Your people rely on you far too much."

"But the Saotome are defeated, aren't they?" Washu questioned. "Ramia is your prisoner, and all is well. Right?"

"There are still pockets of resistance." Najya shook her head. "Odd numbers, sure enough, and many have surrendered. But some still seek to act in Ramia's name, even though her magic is annuled. It will take a while to bring everything under control. And then of course, there are the hundreds of thousands of people living in Saotome dominated regions. The damage done to these people and their ability to live independant free lives is great. Many of them have been enslaved for generations, trapped by the Saotome soul magic. Airai has a lot to do before it can hold its head up as a respectable planet of peace, that's for sure."

"But you have a potential ally in Jurai now, I think." Washu squeezed her hand tightly, and Najya nodded, a smile touching her lips.

"Lady Sasami is a truly amazing child, and thanks to Misao and her connections to that world, I think we do." She agreed softly. "Misao wants to understand her Arian heritage as much as her Shizukasari heritage, now. I think she's learnt that she can be the kind of leader she chooses to be, as she grows. I never thought I'd say this about a Saotome descendant, but I think she will be a great Lady, with time and experience. She's been protected for too long, but at last she's learning the lessons she needs to learn. And with any luck, that's our foot in the door of Juraian diplomacy. I don't seek an Empire for Airai, not like Ramia did. But just to have my planet safe and able to trade without restrictions… that would suit me. Much of Airai is still very poor, you know… people still starve to death unnoticed in some of the remote mountain villages. If Jurai lift their sanctions against Arian trade, things are bound to improve."

"You are almost like Airai's Empress now, aren't you?" Washu eyed her friend in surprise, and Najya frowned.

"I don't know about that." She hedged. "I don't think all of the peoples of Airai would like me to call myself that. But the Akara are the dominant force on Airai now, and I hope that will continue."

"Seeing you in this environment almost makes me a little guilty." Washu admitted, as they wandered back towards the central Akara

estate. As they did so, a small child ran across their path, chasing after a ball, and as she did so, she cast Najya a wide smile, murmuring a greeting and bowing low before her. Najya's featured broke into a playful smile, and she returned the greeting with one of her own, speaking in the strange, gutteral language that over the past few days Washu had become accustomed to hearing all over the planet. Najya's gesture was rewarded with another beaming smile, then the child darted off after her prize once more, carefree and happy in the bright Arian sunshine. Washu glanced up at the sun, pursing her lips.

"Is the sun still the demon that gave the Saotome their eye colour?" She asked thoughtfully. "Or has it been rehabilitated, along with your people's reputation?"

"It's an old tale, born of times of famine and drought." Najya replied with a smile. "In the light of today, it doesn't seem quite so true. I suppose it's easy to blame elements for the sins of people, isn't it? I'm coming to believe that it's all down to the individual to decide who they are and what they do."

She cast her friend a sidelong glance.

"Why do you feel guilty?" She asked. "I don't understand."

"It makes me think of Kihaku and the Priest's Crown I left behind." Washu owned. "Whether or not, if I'd chosen to stick by my family like you have, I'd have been able to create peace between Jurai and my own people. It's a moot point now, of course. But I do wonder."

"Washu, you can't change that past, even if you want to." Najya said firmly. "And you should consider this, instead. You helped to bring down Kagato. The Prince who would have destroyed thousands or millions of lives if he'd been allowed to continue in his plans. I failed to do that. We all have our contributions to make, after all."

"Ryoko and Tenchi defeated Kagato. Not me."

"But Ryoko was your creation, and Tenchi is the man who loves her." Najya said sensibly. "Without your interference, neither one would have been there to fight against Kagato's dark magic. Would they? You're too hard on yourself."

Mischief danced in her ruby eyes.

"Noone is perfect, not even the genius scientist Washu Hakubi."

"I've missed you." Washu smiled sheepishly. "When you say things like that, I realise how much I have. Noone else remembers Mikamo, or anything that happened on Jurai. It's like another lifetime ago, but

he shouldn't be forgotten. And I don't want him to be remembered because he died at Kagato's hand. You remember who he was, and that means a lot to know. That I'm not the only one who thinks of him as a living person."

"Mikamo Niwase was a great friend and colleague." Najya's pretty eyes became grave, and she nodded her head. "And my grief at his passing still remains, Washu. Remember, for me, it wasn't so very long ago. I've slept for so many years that some of those thoughts and emotions are still fresh."

"I suppose that they would be." Washu nodded pensively. "Although I'm not sure if mine are any different."

"But you do have family, Washu. That's something to be thankful for, at the very least."

"Yes." A faint smile touched Washu's lips. "I do have that. And a place to call home, even though my planet is reduced to componant atoms. I shouldn't complain."

"When are you leaving, Washu-chan?"

"Tomorrow, I think." Washu considered. "I promised Ryoko I wouldn't have her ship away for so very long, and it was one of the terms of her letting me use Ryo Ohki. I think in light of recent events, she realises that I can be trusted to fly the thing safely — and Ryo Ohki doesn't mind. I think she remembered that you saved her against Ramia in space, so she's disposed to be fond of you."

"I like Ryo Ohki, too." Najya's face broke into an amused smile. "She's just the kind of spacecraft I can imagine you creating, Washu."

She hesitated, then,

"But you will come to Airai again? I mean, now you know there's someone here for you to visit?"

"You can count on that." Washu assured her. "I've still got so many things to find out, in truth. Yurikage-sama's sword went back to Jurai and his family, just as you said it should. I believe that Sasami dedicated a shrine to him, and the sword has been hung there, in memory of the sacrifice he made for his Princess. But I still have a lot of questions about it that remain unanswered. I know that the weapon was a threat to you and might have been to Ryoko, too, if we hadn't been careful. But even so, the scientist in me wants to know more."

"Of course it does." Najya eyed her friend affectionately, pushing open the door of the Estate and leading the way into a spacious front

solar, where a small, furry cabbit was snoozing in the rays of midday sun that danced in through the expansive glass windows. “And I realise that’s as much why you came here as to see me. I’m sorry you’ve not had much chance to go exploring the region for yourself — but it’s really not safe to go wandering there until we know that the Saotome insurrections are over. They might not pose us a big threat, but they can attack and kill travellers, and even with your magic, I wouldn’t want to put you at risk. Some of them do have kill or be killed attitudes, after all.”

“It’s probably better I don’t take any of the ore back with me, anyway.” Washu reflected. “If you really think it could be dangerous to Ryoko’s health.”

“Difficult to say for sure.” Najya sank down into an empty seat, and Washu settled herself on the chaise beside the sleeping Ryo Ohki, reaching across absently to ruffle fingers through her hair. “I mean, she’s an unusual girl, your daughter. I didn’t sense anything Saotome about her, but she has the eyes of that clan, and the magic must live within her. It might have no effect on her whatsoever… but it’s probably safer that you don’t find out.”

“Could it kill one of you, Najya?”

“I suppose it could, if wielded by someone as strong as your Prince Tenchi.” Najya nodded. “Fortunately there are few warriors of his calibre on Jurai, or anywhere else in the universe. But yes, we’re certainly not blade-proof. And since many of us rely on our magic for our protection, it’s a much easier way to kill a mage. That’s why it pushed Ramia out of Sasami’s body in the first place. Yurikage-sama’s weapon is a truly strong piece of equipment… and it is better off far from Airai.”

“But if Jurai and Airai were to remain enemies?”

“Well, I know.” Najya admitted. “Then it would be in enemy hands. But still, if it’s being used as part of the Lord’s memorial, it probably won’t be desecrated.”

“Tenchi was sure the man’s spirit lingered with it, but I wasn’t sure how that could be.” Washu rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “A lot of questions, like I said.”

“And few answers, sadly.” Najya owned. “Even as a scientist, I don’t pretend to understand everything.”

“You still consider yourself that, then?”

“Of course.” Najya nodded. “That was the Najya I wanted to be —

and the one Father let me be. It was an agreement between us. I could choose my path, so long as I never forgot my overriding loyalty to the Akara or where that path would one day lead me. I promised him that when my people needed me, I'd come back and do as he would have wanted. And so I have. But I'm still Dr Najya Akara, just as you remain Professor Washu Hakubi."

"Roomates as we were, so many years ago." Washu murmured. "But so much has passed since then. At least, for me."

"Yes." Najya agreed. "Some good, some bad. But I'm happy to be reunited with you, Washu. And so long as you still have questions about Airai and Arian magic, I can feel confident you'll make the trip again."

"I'd come either way." Washu said firmly. "I don't have many old friends — most of the people I once knew are no longer alive. Now I know you are, I refuse to lose contact with you again. Even if it's some time before I visit next — I won't forget. And I'll expect you to keep in contact with me, regardless."

"On that you have my word." Najya's red eyes sparkled. "I wouldn't want it any other way."

It was another beautiful summer's day.

The young girl stretched out on her back, gazing pensively up at the skies over her head. Around her, birds wheeled and cried, and here, sheltered by the web of dense forest, she knew that very little would molest her. After all, she mused absently, she had grown up in these parts, and noone knew the woodlands as well as she did. Every nook, every cranny, every hidden escape route, all were fresh in her memory and if danger should approach, she would be quick to disappear into the scrub and vegetation as if she had never been there.

She sighed, biting her lip.

The sky had an eerie, glassy hue about it today, she realised, and as she contemplated what it meant, she brought her hands up before her in a gesture of protection. The dense glow that surrounded their world was growing thicker and more stifling, but on a day like this, it was easy to forget the dangers that lurked in the shadows.

"Mayuka!"

A voice startled her and she turned, scrambling to her feet as she scanned her surroundings for a sign of the speaker. For a moment, tension rippled through her, as she prepared to flee into the branches

of the trees, but then she spied the intruder, and she relaxed, a smile spreading across her lips.

“Tadashi!”

“Shh.” The young man shook his head, raising his finger to his lips as he cast a cautious glance around him. “Not so loudly.”

“Sorry.” Mayuka looked contrite, coming slowly across the grass to join him as she cast him a pensive, appraising look. He was dressed, as he often was, in the rich-dyed fabrics of military uniform, a sharp sword hanging at his belt, and to all intents and purposes he looked like any other Guardsman. And yet, the affectionate sparkle in his green eyes told a different story. With a grin, Mayuka flung her arms around the newcomer, and he hugged her tightly.

“I’m glad you’re safe.” He whispered. “This morning, patrols were sent out this way, in search of interlopers. I know how you like to come here — I wanted to give you warning.”

“And I appreciate it, although I’m loath to go back below ground.” Mayuka bit her lip. “It’s such a nice day, Tadashi. It seems a shame to have to hide.”

“Mayuka, if anyone was to catch you, and discover who you were…” Tadashi left his sentence hanging, and Mayuka sighed, resting her head against his chest. At length she nodded.

“I know.” She acknowledged. “I’m the last of my tribe, and the demon Yuzuha has done her best to eradicate each and every one of us since she took control of this planet fifteen years ago. If she knew that I survived the raid on my family’s home and was taken in by rebels, she’d stop at nothing to track me down.”

“Which is why you need to be more careful.” Tadashi sighed, gently brushing a wisp of hair out of her face. “For both our sakes, Mayuka. You must. My family have done everything to raise and protect you over the past fifteen years, but now there is only me to do that. If we were to be found out now…”

“Are you in trouble?” Mayuka looked alarmed. Tadashi shook his head.

“No, not as yet.” He said cautiously. “Although if she discovers how often I slip off by myself, I might be. It’s all right, Mayuka. I don’t mind. Just don’t put yourself in more danger than you can help, all right? You’re eighteen summers, and as time passes, more and more people flock to the rebel cause. But it’s too soon yet and Yuzuha is powerful. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“For the sake of this planet, Tadashi-kun, or for my benefit?” Mayuka asked softly. Tadashi offered her a crooked smile, but Mayuka was aware of the clouded hesitation in his green eyes.

“Both.” He said honestly. “But I would hate to lose you, Mayuka-chan.”

He hesitated, then gently, he kissed her. “So do as I say and stay safe, all right? I have to go, before I’m missed… do as I suggest and take cover beneath the earth. In this bright daylight, Yuzuha won’t set forth herself on a rebel hunt, but she has countless men to do it for her.”

“I understand. I’ll do as you advise.” Mayuka agreed reluctantly. “But only because it’s you asking. I don’t want you in trouble on my account, Tadashi, so go back to the demon and play nicely in her presence. You needn’t worry about me. I’ll be gone before you know it.”

With that she squeezed his hand, offering him a shy, affectionate smile before darting off into the undergrowth, slipping between the trunks of old trees as she counted her pathway back to the pile of chipped stones that marked the entrance to the place she had long since called home. As she reached her destination, she cast a glance around her to make sure she was not being observed, then she shifted back the top stone, watching impatiently as the greyish slab slid back with a heavy rumble to reveal a passageway. Stepping inside, she pressed her palms against the underside of the stone, until it returned to its original state, concealing the pathway completely from view. Then she hurried downwards, almost tripping over her own feet as she hastened towards the central core of her world. As she travelled, she passed openings which lead off to a network of other trails and at the foot of the winding stairway she paused, hesitating for a moment beneath one of the archways.

“I hate living in secret, but what else can I do?” She murmured, stepping into the conical chamber and running her fingers absently against the dusty rock that lined the walls. The blue flame of the wooden torches spluttered and glowed in their sconces, creating a dim, ethereal glow, and as Mayuka moved closer, she dropped to her knees before the carved image that stood on the pedestal, wings outstretched in a gesture of both friendship and domination. Closing her eyes, she pressed her hands together, muttering a soft, fervent prayer for Tadashi’s continued safety, and then she raised her gaze to the magnificent bird, taking in the carefully carved outline of the creature as she did so. It was an old statue, she knew that. It had been

crafted by some of her world's first settlers, and over the ages each generation had added to it, until it had been the centre-piece of one of the most magnificent temples on her planet. And yet, fifteen years ago, it had been exiled to its current beneath-ground home, as the people of the Eagle cowered under the threat of the demon.

"Yuzuha's hold on my world grows all the time, and yet I don't know how to stop her, Holy Eagle." She murmured. "All the blood of my tribe is invested in me, but I am weak and I lack experience or knowledge in how I should act. Please, give me some guidance. I need to know if there is a way to save my people from Yuzuha's demon grasp."

The chamber remained silent, and Mayuka sighed, shuffling closer to the statue and resting her hands contemplatively on its crystal-coated base. The minerals glowed beneath her fingers, and a faint smile touched her lips. It had been little more than a year since the meteor had crashed into the centre of their world, and many of her people had taken it as a sign — an omen against the oppressive rule of the demon Yuzuha. Fragments of the meteor had been spirited away beneath the earth as offerings to the Eagle, and a skilled craftsman had worked night and day to adorn the eyes and the base of the great statue with shards of the rock, believing that it could only help strengthen the bird's already divine power. Many of the people now wore jewellery crafted from the strange irridescent ore, and Mayuka's gaze rested briefly on the bluestone bracelets that encircled each of her wrists — presents from Tadashi six months earlier to mark her eighteenth year and, they both hoped, their future together.

She glanced back at the Eagle, absorbing its austere expression.

"You do hear me, I know you do." She murmured, brushing her hand over the stones once more. "You, the God brought to this world by our ancestors in the time before written record. You who have survived for so many generations — you must hear me. We have always served you well, Eagle-sama. You must know how badly we need your help."

Almost as if in response to her comment, Mayuka saw the glow of the shards intensify, and as she rested her hands on them once more, she was sure she could feel a faint, pulsing vibration shudder through them. Her eyes opened wide, and she gazed up at the eagle statue in surprised disbelief. Had she imagined it, or had the bird's eyes glowed blue for the briefest of instants? She frowned, her eyes narrowing, but try as she might, she could not see anything other than carved stone as the bird arced over her, wings spread in the gesture of protection

that her ancestors had so favoured.

She sighed, closing her eyes as she focused her thoughts on another prayer.

“Holy Eagle, if you do hear me, please tell me how to act.” She pleaded. “For Tadashi, for myself, for the people of this world. We need you, more now than we ever have before. Every day, more of us are killed or enslaved by the Demon’s will. Please, Great Eagle, give us direction on what we should do!”

A flare of light blazed up around her at this juncture, as the glitter of the stones became an intense, dancing flame and Mayuka fell back with a gasp of surprise and fear as the strange flickers spread all around her, surrounding her body in their glow. She drew back, as if to avoid their touch, but the flames only grew brighter, darting and leaping as they created a wall between her and the Eagle. Half-wondering if this was one of Yuzuha’s bewitchments, Mayuka swallowed hard, fighting against the urge to panic and give herself away. Then, just as she was sure that she would be devoured by the tongues of flame, the fire seemed to calm and fade, revealing instead the faint outlines of an image. Fear forgotten, Mayuka inched forwards, transfixed as the picture in the fire became more and more vivid. Little by little she could make out trees and valleys, the bright landscape of a planet not unlike her own, and as she stared deeper into the strange projection, she found she could make out the form of an individual, brought to life before her by the dance of the flames. The image of a young woman stood before her, thick waves of red hair blowing in the wind as she gazed out across the landscape. Atop her head was the coronet of the Eagle, and she was robed from head to foot in flowing fabrics, remeniscent of some of the ancient carvings and ink-sketches Mayuka had seen as she had grown up beneath the planet’s surface. A strange glow emanated from the woman’s body, and Mayuka let out a gasp, reaching out a hand to touch the picture as it flickered and faded into nothing before her eyes.

“No! No, don’t stop! Don’t go!” She whispered. “Show me again, Great Eagle! Show me again the one who wears your crown!”

The last of the fire flickered and died, leaving the chamber strangely dark and cold, and Mayuka sighed, sinking back against the wall. She closed her eyes, drawing the image of the woman back to the forefront of her mind as she considered her appearance once again. As she did so, a flicker of excitement stirred in her young heart.

“The Priestess lives.” She whispered. “That’s what you’re telling me, Eagle-sama. Find the Priestess and our world will be freed!”

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

“Another late night?”

Seiryo splashed water on his face, reaching for his towel as he turned to face his sister’s inquisitive expression. It was early morning on Jurai, and the Unko had flown into dock a mere hour earlier, leaving him little time to dress and prepare himself for the day ahead.

“Seiryo, what time were you away from Jurai till last night?”

“Are you checking up on me?” A faint smile of amusement touched Seiryo’s lips and he dried his face, tossing the towel aside as he came to join her. “Suki, I almost think you worry about me getting into trouble again, if I’m too far from Jurai without a chaperone.”

“Do you *need* a chaperone?” Suki arched an eyebrow, and Seiryo’s smile became rueful. He shook his head.

“Bad choice of words.” He said simply. “What I mean is, you don’t trust me to take the Unko out on my own if Lady Sasami or one of the Knights aren’t with me to keep an eye on my deeds.”

“Well, I do trust you.” Suki sighed. “But I worry, that’s all. Nii-chan, you have a lot of responsibilities these days. I just don’t want you to get yourself mixed up in something bad again, that’s all. I know that you’re recovered from your past experiences now — but I suppose I still have the occasional fear that you’ll lapse into old ways.”

“You have so little faith.” Seiryo said reprovingly. “But if it puts your mind at rest, little sister, last night I was conducting some training. That’s all.”

“Training? In the middle of the night?” Suki stared. Seiryo laughed.

“Not everything occurs within daylight hours, and I’m no longer as tired as I was after Tokimi’s magic cursed me.” He reassured her. “Besides, your fears are unfounded. I am not in any trouble, and everything I do is with the full knowledge and backing of the Lady Sasami. I have no intention of jeopardising the position I have now by acting outside of Jurai’s guidance, believe me.”

Suki bit her lip.

“I’m sorry.” She said honestly, taking him by the hand and leading him down the stairs towards the Tennan estate’s main dining room, where already the scent of freshly cooked breakfast could be detected. “I guess I worry too much. I should have more faith, I suppose — but if Sasami knows about it, I guess it must be all right. You should tell her to give you the occasional day or night off, though. You must be exhausted.”

“I slept aboard the Unko. I’m used to doing that.” Seiryo reflected. “When I was with the Galaxy Police, I often slept interstellar. The Unko is fitted with every necessity for long distance journeys — I’m not as ragged as you think.”

He paused, sniffing the air.

“I am hungry, however.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, because breakfast is ready.” Suki’s eyes twinkled. “One good thing that has come of your being back in royal favour is that we have house-staff on hand to cook and clean again, and I can spend more time with Mother and Tokimi. Speaking of which, I think Tokimi helped to grill the fish this morning. She was interested in cooking, so she’s been in and out of the kitchens since dawn, helping the servants to prepare.”

“Tokimi has?” Seiryo faltered, his hand resting on the door of the dining room as he eyed his sister doubtfully. “Is that a good idea? She could hurt herself.”

“Tokimi isn’t as stupid as you seem to think she is.” Suki scolded him. “And she’s perfectly capable of doing a simple task like preparing fish.”

“I suppose so.” Seiryo looked chastened. “I’m sorry. I suppose I think of her still in the light of victim, but I suppose that she isn’t as helpless as she first appears.”

“No, she’s not.” Suki looked thoughtful, as they entered the dining room, each taking their seats as one of the newly appointed serving maids bowed her head, hurrying to the kitchen to convey news of their presence. “It’s hard to know, really, what she does and doesn’t remember. But I think… things she did on Kihaku, before her father died — a lot of those are still in her mind. Like all the things she does with the flowers. Even if she hasn’t got the same blooms here as on Kihaku.”

“Nii-chan! Suki!” At that moment, the subject of their conversation entered the room, blue eyes bright with excitement as she hurried to

the table. “Good morning!”

“Good morning, Tokimi.” Seiryo offered her an affectionate grin, taking in her simple enthusiasm as he did so, and marvelling — not for the first time — how little it took to make the former Priestess smile. “Suki says you’ve been helping out this morning.”

“I’ve been cooking fish.” Tokimi agreed, pride glittering in her gaze as she nodded her head. “Nii-chan will eat?”

Suki giggled.

“Nii-chan’s starving hungry, by his own admission.” She said playfully. “Yes, Tokimi, I think you can guarantee we’ll both be trying your fish.”

“Good.” Tokimi rewarded her adoptive sister with another wide beam. “Tokimi cooked it like on Kihaku. A special fish preparation that Otousama taught me to know.”

“Kii fish?” Seiryo raised an eyebrow. Tokimi nodded, gesturing towards the glass-paned doors that led out to the expansive Tennan grounds.

“With special herbs, over a fire.” She agreed. “For Niichan and Suki to try.”

“Over a…” Seiryo faltered, and Suki laughed.

“We’re game, Tokimi-chan.” She said with a grin. “Though if you were setting fires outside, I hope you were careful to put the flames out again. We don’t want them to spread.”

“Fire is gone now. All finished. Fish is ready.” Tokimi dimpled. “Tokimi will come back with fish!”

With that she disappeared, and Seiryo cast his sister a quizzical look.

“She’s cooking fish over open fires in our gardens, now?” He asked softly. “On a planet where the primary material of construction is wood?”

“I think you should have a little more faith in her.” Suki said evenly. “On Kihaku, she’d probably have cooked like that every time. She knows what she’s doing.”

“I hope she does.” Seiryo frowned. “But just to satisfy my own anxieties, I’ll be checking the grounds myself before I go to the palace to see Lady Sasami. Kihaku and Jurai are very different, after all. Kihaku might have used stone, and it would not have been so easy to

set alight a whole estate by setting one careless fire. But I'd rather know that nothing is smouldering out there, if its all the same to you. Rain isn't exactly a pre-requisite of Juraian weather, after all."

"Fine." Suki sighed, resignation in her expression. "But don't say anything to Tokimi. She's worked hard this morning, and she's done it for you more than anything. You know she's devoted to you, Seiryo… you shouldn't be so doubting of her. She went to a lot of trouble, after all — from what some of the maid-servants were saying, she went down to the stream and caught the fish herself."

"This morning?" Seiryo stared, and Suki nodded.

"She apparently wanted something fresh." She agreed. "So bite your tongue, all right? You might hurt her feelings, otherwise. I know she always seems to smile, Onii-sama, but I'm sure that she can still be upset, if you're careless with what you say."

"I suppose that's true." Seiryo admitted. He sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "Very well. I shall eat Tokimi's fish, I shall praise her, and then I shall take a general walk in the grounds on the errand of finding flowers to take to Lady Sasami on some pretext or other. There. Will that suit?"

"Yes. That sounds sensible." Suki nodded. "Now shh. I can hear her coming back. I don't know what exactly you did to inspire such adoration in the girl, but she truly sees you as her older brother. In light of that, it wouldn't hurt for you to be a little more tactful around her sometimes. All right?"

"Memo noted." Seiryo replied ruefully. "Very well, Suki. I have taken your remarks on board. Besides, I'm so hungry this morning that I'm ready to eat anything. I shan't slight Tokimi by wasting her efforts!"

"Well, Ryo Ohki, Najya certainly gave us enough things to think about, didn't she?"

Washu sank back in the ship's pilot's chair, brushing her fingers affectionately across the nearest of the diamante crystals that hovered not far from her reach. Three hours ago, she and the living ship had departed Airai, full of promises to see Najya again as soon as possible, and as the craft coursed through space, Washu reflected on all the things that she had discovered from her visit.

"I'm grateful to you for bringing me. I know it was short notice, but I really appreciate it. You've done a lot of flying of late, after all."

Ryo Ohki let out a yowl, her cabbit reflection glimmering for a moment in the crystal's smooth surface, and Washu smiled.

"So you still see me as your mother, do you?" She murmured. "I'm glad to hear it. I didn't expect Ryoko would give in so easily — she's never trusted me with you like this so much before. But then again, I suppose it's a good way of ridding herself of an unwanted chaperone, isn't it? No doubt, with you and I out of the way, she has a chance to have Tenchi all to herself."

Ryo Ohki mewed, and Washu laughed.

"I think you're a sucker for a happy ending." She accused. "You're a soft romantic at heart, aren't you, Ryo Ohki? You really want to see them get their happy ever after."

The crystals glittered and hovered, and Washu knew her assumptions had been correct. She nodded.

"Yes, me too." She admitted. "They've been through enough to deserve it. And Ryoko… sometimes reminds me of me more than I'd like to admit. I don't want to see her alone in the way I've been for so long. Seeing Najya brought back a lot of memories, not all of them happy. I do wonder, sometimes, how it might have ended up for me had I been able to keep Mikamo. But there's no sense dwelling on a past I can't change, is there, Ryo Ohki? If Mikamo and I had eloped, Ryoko would never have been born, after all. And nor would you, more than likely. So there's some good in everything."

Ryo Ohki howled, shifting her course as the scientist tapped new coordinates into her control panel, and Washu smiled.

"Sometimes I think I understand the things you're trying to say even if I don't have the same bond with you Ryoko does." She reflected. "You're a good listener, you know. Unlike your sister-in-science, you're far more patient with other people's feelings. Still, I suppose even Ryoko is learning in that department. To hear her talking so seriously about marriage on our way back from Yousai was a surprise, I have to admit. Even though it's clear where Ryoko and Tenchi's relationship is heading — it was the first time I got the impression she was ready to make such a commitment. She's always been such a headstrong creature… but I don't know. Perhaps she's growing up more than I realised."

She got to her feet, moving absently to the craft's black-glass window as she gazed out across space, a wistful smile touching her lips.

“It’s a fine thing, being so much in love as that.” She murmured, more to herself than to the ship, although Ryo Ohki let out a sympathetic whimper at her words. “Yes, I’m sure that Ryoko and Tenchi will make a good go of it, even though I can’t imagine they’ll be anything like a conventional couple. Still, who wants conventional, anyway? Thinking outside the box has always held more appeal… I think they’ll do just fine.”

She pressed her hands up against the window, taking in the constellations as she judged where abouts they were.

“Not far from where Kihaku used to be.” She realised. “Another left at the edge of this sector, Ryo Ohki, and we should have a direct course home. I’m pretty sure that… hey, hang on a minute! What’s that?”

She frowned, pursing her lips as she struggled to make out the strange glowing light that glimmered from the midst of what she had assumed was another stellar constellation. “That’s no star. Ryo Ohki, change of plan. Forty-five degrees south-east, please — I want to see what’s creating that strange light.”

Ryo Ohki mewed her confusion, and Washu nodded, turning to meet the cabbit’s bewildered gaze in the floating crystals.

“I know, it’s out of our way.” She agreed. “But Ryoko won’t mind if we take a little longer, surely? After all, it is her alone time with Tenchi, and I doubt she’ll even notice if we add a few hours to our trip. Do you mind, Ryo Ohki? I’d like to see what it is.”

Ryo Ohki yowled in response, but she obediently swung her jagged frame around, plotting a new course in the direction Washu had instructed, and the scientist’s gaze narrowed as she assessed what it was she was seeing.

“I thought it was a supernova, but it’s not. I think it’s a planet.” She reflected. “But it has… some kind of barrier around it. Something that I’ve not seen in… well, in generations. How strange.”

Ryo Ohki mewed, and Washu glanced up sharply.

“Don’t you see it?” She asked softly. “Ryo Ohki, you have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

The cabbit-ship’s yowled response told Washu that her deduction was correct, and she bit her lip, making up her mind.

“Well, I can’t just not find out what it is, giving off that glow.” She said at length. “Listen to me, Ryo Ohki. If you can’t pick it up on your

sensors, you'll have to follow my coordinates as I give them to you. I know you can do that — just trust me, all right? We're drawing closer, and I want to know what it is giving off that light. I know its short notice, but you have to realise, the last time I saw an aura like that around a planet…"

She faltered, biting her lip.

"It was Kihaku." She murmured hesitantly. "When I left the planet aboard Senichi Tennan's Juraian ship. My planet glowed with the same intensity, then. The life force of the people, protected by the World. In all my travels through space and time, I've never seen another planet that looked so much like my world from space."

Ryo Ohki drew her crystals closer to the scientist's body, uttering a soft miaow, and Washu nodded.

"Yes, I think you're following my train of thought." She agreed. "I want to go down there. Land, and take a look around. It shouldn't be too hard. I don't think that it *is* a barrier, come to think of it… it's something else. We should be all right, if you're able to trust my landing coordinates. I don't know why you can't see it, but its more than possible that your scanners just aren't tuned in to deal with this kind of energy. As I said, I only ever saw it once before, and that was generations ago. I probably didn't program this particular phenomenon into your data-banks."

She paused, then,

"Are you willing to land, Ryo Ohki, so I can find out where we are?" She asked softly. Ryo Ohki hesitated for a moment, then her crystals glowed with amber light, and Washu smiled.

"Thank you." She whispered. "All right. Listen very carefully. This is where I want you to go."

The shrine was quiet as the girl slipped between the sandstone pillars, pausing briefly to examine the carved image of the Goddess Tsunami as she did so. A faint, bittersweet smile touched her lips, and she ducked beneath the likeness, entering the temple proper as she stood before the platform, her gaze running over the lit candles and the basket of offerings that had been laid before the shrine by the inhabitants of the local area. Already, she mused, Tsunami's force was growing. And yet, despite this, she had not come here because of the Goddess.

In one corner, over a red-wood incense burner, a glittering silver

sword hung, its hilt carved and welded in unusual foreign style, and as she approached it, the girl flickered white flame from her fingers, touching the wick of the incense as it flared into life, spreading the gentle scent of Juraian herbs across the small stone chamber. She moved her hands together in a silent blessing, running her touch over the shining metal as she did so.

“Lord Motonoya.” She whispered. “Tsunami-kami-sama still honours you as one of her own.”

“Princess Sasami!”

The voice startled her, and she turned, a smile flooding her features as she registered her companion.

“Seiryo.” She said wih a grin. “What brings you so far down here? I didn’t think you had time for spiritual matters.”

“Not as a rule, but Azaka told me that you’d come to the shrine to cast a blessing over Yurikage’s memorial, and so I thought I’d save us both time by coming to find you instead of hovering at the palace.” Seiryo leant up against the sandstone doorframe, running his gaze over the heavy silver blade. “You know, you spend a lot of time here of late. Was I mistaken about your regard for him, Princess? Would he have indeed been your consort, one day?”

“No, probably not.” Sasami flushed pink at the insinuation, glancing at the ground. “But I was fond of him, in a strange way. He was… he was loyal, and he meant well. And he gave his life for me, Seiryo. I can’t forget that so easily. Even though I don’t blame Misao at all for what happened, I still feel sad for Yurikage and his family. He was caught up in something because of me — and so it’s only right that I give him my blessing. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Seiryo eyed her keenly. “I’m sorry. I suppose that in my mind when a man is dead, he’s dead. I didn’t mean to interrupt your spiritual musings.”

“It’s all right. I’d finished, anyway.” Sasami assured him. “I didn’t realise what the time was, that’s all. It’s me who should be sorry.”

She sighed, shaking her head.

“All this Cult of Tsunami stuff is so annoying, sometimes.” She added. “I mean, having to take care of so much business. It’s a pain.”

“I see.” Seiryo looked amused. “Well, thats why you have Azaka, Kamidake and myself to assist you. Plus the guardsmen your Lord Father assigned to your person. You aren’t on your own.”

“No, I know.” Sasami cast one last look at Yurikage’s memorial, then turned away from it, leading the way out into the sunlight. “But I seem to be so busy at the moment. That’s all.”

“A lot of damage was done when Tsunami was tainted by Ramia.” Seiryo said frankly. “When everything has settled down, I’m sure you won’t be quite so busy.”

“I hope you’re right.” Sasami sighed. “I get precious little time to spend with Suki or anyone else, except when discussing some kind of official matter.”

“That’s a part of growing up, Princess.”

“I know.” Sasami nodded. “But it sucks.”

“Perhaps it does.” Humour glittered in Seiryo’s malachite eyes. “From that, am I to assume you have no direct instruction for me this morning?”

“Not that I can think of. Maybe if you ask Kamidake, he’ll have an idea.” Sasami admitted. “I know that he and Father were talking about a lot last night. You weren’t around — were you with Kiyone again?”

“You make it sound like an illicit tryst, Hime.”

“I don’t mean to.” Sasami giggled, despite herself. “But I mean, with her training. When you weren’t at your home, I told Father that I’d sent you on an errand and I’d forgotten till then that I had. But I didn’t, so I guess…”

“I was with Kiyone. And I’m grateful for your discretion in that matter.” Seiryo agreed gravely. “It seems the least I owe her for our uncertain early acquaintance, and I find she learns fast.”

“It’s a shame she’s not Juraian. I could co-opt her to help me, if she was.” Sasami sighed. “But anyway, you don’t need to thank me. You spend a lot of your life serving either Uncle or I. You should be allowed to do things yourself, too… and I know you have your reasons for spending so much time working with Kiyone. I know you want her to be able to defend herself on all levels, and I know you’re still working off all the bad karma between the two of you. Honestly, I’m glad to see you as friends… so I won’t intervene.”

“Suki’s starting to wonder about it.” Seiryo admitted. “But I told her you knew about it, so she backed off. I don’t really want to explain to my sister why it is I’m training someone I once tried to kill.”

“Then I won’t say anything to her, although I think she might understand more than you think.” Sasami dimpled. “Meantime, Lord

Tennan, tell me your news. I want to have a conversation that doesn't involve politics for once, so walk me back to the palace and tell me about something other than Tsunami's Cult. All right?"

"Something other than Tsunami's Cult?"

"Yes." Sasami nodded emphatically. "Because even if I do have a lot on my plate at the moment, there's more to my life than being Tsunami!"

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

"Well, here we are, Ryo-chan."

Washu stepped out of the haze of the spaceship's transport beam, holding out her arm to the craft who yowled, morphing herself into her mammal form and hopping eagerly up onto her creator's shoulders. "Thank you for the detour. If nothing else, it gives you a break from flying, doesn't it? And I'm glad we chose to land. The atmosphere around this planet is remarkable… I almost wish I'd brought more scientific equipment with me. It might even be a climatic match to Kihaku, which would explain why I was so reminded of my own planet when we passed."

She paused, gazing around her at the dense forest over which Ryo Ohki had chosen to land, a rueful smile touching her lips.

"Or maybe I'm just biased by all the vegetation." She acknowledged. "I have to admit, it takes me back. Well, we can't stand here all day staring at branches. Lets take a look around and see if this planet is inhabited, shall we? Maybe we can learn a little from the people, and I'm always looking for a new research project. If Najya won't sanction me examining that Arian ore, I need another line of enquiry and this seems to be a promising one. Come on."

As they made their way through the dimly lit forest land, a clearing became visible up ahead, and as Washu stepped out into the sunlight for the first time, she stopped dead, her eyes widening in surprise as she realised they had reached a small settlement, with a conclave of seven or eight rough houses clustered around a central square. To all intents and purposes, the buildings seemed to have been there for some years, but by contrast the strange figurine in the middle was brand new, gleaming and somewhat sinister in black marble. Smoke drifted from the conical chimneys of the small, hut-like buildings, and Washu moved nearer, spellbound by this image of tranquility.

As they drew closer, a stone archway became visible, almost cloaked completely by thick growing green briars and vines, and as she squinted at it, Washu realised something was carved into the stone, hidden from clear sight by the rampant greenery. Washu paused, glancing at her fingers, then she ran her hand carefully over the surface of the stone, burning the stray tendrils of the creeping

plants away to ashes. Ryo Ohki gave her a reproving nip on the ear, and the scientist looked rueful, nodding her head.

“I know, but noone saw me.” She said softly. “Shh, Ryo Ohki. It was just a little bit — I wanted to see what was written here.”

Ryo Ohki leapt up atop the ancient stone structure, settling herself atop the remaining plantlife as Washu peered at the carved characters, struggling to make out the weather-worn writing. At first, they seemed to make no sense, but then her eyes widened with surprise, and slowly she traced her finger around the outline of the central character.

“Eagle.” She murmured. “But…”

She frowned, shaking her head as she concentrated her attention on the remaining letters. Most of them were almost completely eradicated by their years under what was obviously an unforgiving climate at times, and others had apparently been deliberately sabotaged, crudely scraped away with some flat-ended instrument. Still, Washu persevered, and as she stared at them more closely, she found her patience and perseverence rewarded. Her eyes narrowed, as softly she murmured the words under her breath.

“Blessed of the Eagle.” She whispered. “I thought so. This is a tribal arch — a ritual keepsake. They used to be all over Kihaku, Ryo Ohki. But I don’t understand — what would one be doing on a world like this? It makes no sense.”

Ryo Ohki cocked her head on one side, clearly confused, and Washu shook her head in frustration.

“Kihaku is dead.” She said flatly. “But here we are, miles from my world, and this arch has been carved with divine writing belonging to the World. The pattern, the style, even the characters are the same. They’re Kii. But that’s not possible. Kihaku is gone — so what does it mean?”

She stood back from the arch with a sigh.

“I suppose we’ll have to find someone and ask. Perhaps it was plundered during a Juraian raid — it certainly looks old enough to have been dumped here a long time ago.” She reflected. “This could well be a Juraian colony, after all, and that might explain it.”

She cast a glance up at the cabbit, who had begun to wash herself, and despite her confusion, she grinned.

“You stay there and take a break, okay?” She said softly. “I’ll be back in just a few minutes. I want to take a look at the statue. This

place doesn't look deserted — I mean, those houses have fires, because I can see the smoke. But noone is around, and that seems odd to me. Maybe there'll be something in the middle of the square which will explain why that is, and tell us exactly where we are."

Ryo Ohki mewed her assent, settling down to wait as Washu stepped carefully along the uneven stone of the path, glancing at the homes that flanked her way as she made her way to the centre of the settlement. It was, she decided, no more than a small village, and yet even the layout of the properties reminded her of places she had visited on Kihaku, when in her father's company. She frowned.

"The similarities are strange, and almost sinister." She reflected, as finally she reached the central statue, crouching down to read the characters across the base. "So where am I, exactly? What is this world?"

The foot of the blackstone pillar was carved with row upon row of lettering, and as Washu settled herself before it, she realised that, like with the archway, these were written in Kii. She frowned, her brows knitting together as she tried to work out why.

"The arch is old, but this is not." She murmured. "This statue is of a creature like nothing I've ever seen, and yet this is my language, carved at its foot. What does that mean? I wish I knew."

She pursed her lips, reading the engraved text aloud to herself softly.

"*The World does not begin. The World does not end, All are subject to the World, sheltered beneath the wings of the divine Eagle."* She whispered. "This is too, too strange. Father, I can almost hear you saying these words as I read them, dressed in your robes, with the crown of the Eagle on your head. None of this makes a bit of sense. And as for this last bit — I don't understand what it means. Power, life, spirit… okay, but what does it symbolise? Is it a name? The person on the statue, perhaps? Riki Shou Ki? Or is that the name of this village? And what is this other writing? I've never seen lettering like that before, not anywhere in all of the galaxies I've visited."

A yowl from behind her alerted her to the fact she had company, and she got to her feet, turning to face the men who had suddenly migrated silently from the buildings, each dressed in military dress, but with a touch of something that drew Washu's memory back once again to her childhood on Kihaku. They were watching her with a mixture of wariness and apprehension, and at a gesture from one of them, each drew his sword, advancing slowly on the scientist where

she stood.

Washu frowned.

“What is this place?” She asked softly, speaking in Galactic Tongue as she tried to assess their intentions. “Who are you people? What do you want?”

Blank expressions crossed the features of each man, and they exchanged looks, muttering to one another in low tones. Washu’s green eyes widened with surprise as she picked up the words for ‘outsider’ and ‘intruder’ and realised that they were talking among themselves in one of the many tribal Kii dialects. With some effort, she struggled to remember which tribe carried such a thick accent and such a distinctive use of construction, but it was buried too deep in her memory and she frowned, forcing her mind back to the present.

“You are a stranger here.” The lead man stepped forward now, raising his weapon in a warning gesture as he met her gaze head on, speaking now in pure, unadulterated Kii. “State your name and your business, or face the justice of the lady Yuzuha for straying into our lands.”

Washu opened her lips to respond, then she faltered, narrowing her gaze.

“I don’t know who this Yuzuha is, or whether or not revealing that I’m Kii is a good idea.” She realised. “Considering the legacy my planet has, even if we do speak the same tongue… it might be better not to give that little fact away just yet. I don’t really fancy being killed, and I’m sure I can easily use my magic to evade them if they attack. Better to feign ignorance, Washu. If you don’t speak their language, after all, they can’t question you about your identity. And besides, this way, maybe I’ll learn something.”

She shut her mouth, holding up her hands in an intergalactic gesture of peace.

“I don’t understand.” She said cheerfully, keeping to Galactic Tongue as she offered them a winning smile. “What did you say?”

More fervour among the guards followed her remark, and this time Washu clearly heard the words ‘foreigner’ and ‘alien’. Inwardly she bristled at the censure and fear in their tone, but she kept her countenance, forcing the sunny smile to remain on her face.

“You must come with us. Lady Yuzuha will decide what to do with you, outsider.” The leader was speaking to her again, in his smooth, traditional Kii, and it was all Washu could do not to respond to him in

the same tongue. He raised his hand, as if signalling to his companions, and Washu braced herself for an attack of blades, but much to her surprise, the men sheathed their swords, clasping their hands together as if in prayer. Startled and totally taken off guard by this behaviour, Washu could only stare as the lead member of the band raised his hands above his head, muttering words in a strange language that she was unable to make out. As he did so, Washu realised the trap she had fallen into, as weakness and paralysis began to spread through her limbs and she let out a gasp, sinking to her knees as she struggled in vain to fight against the strange grip of the magic. Ryo Ohki's yowl of dismay broke through her panic, and she drew a deep breath into her lungs, summoning all her strength as she felt unconsciousness begin to seep over her senses.

"Ryo Ohki, go home!" She exclaimed, her voice hoarse as she became aware of the guardsmen closing in around her. "Go home to Ryoko. Tell her what's happened… go get help!"

Ryo Ohki hesitated, clearly unwilling to leave her creator alone and at the mercy of her captors, but Washu clenched her fists, drawing on the last of her will.

"Go now!" She shouted. "Ryo Ohki, go now, before they find you too!"

This time, the small cabbit seemed to pick up on the desperate urgency in her voice and she hopped down from the stone arch, disappearing into the undergrowth as she darted away from the guards and their strange, alluring magic spells. Washu swallowed hard, dizziness overwhelming her, and she gave up the fight, as the tension seeped out of her body. She slumped to the ground, dimly aware of a hand on her shoulder as she lay there, helpless to help herself as her captors closed in once more.

"We will take her to the Prisons and the Lady Yuzuha can decide her fate." She heard one man say. "She is an outsider, so she will likely follow the fate of other outsiders. Come. Bring her. We will report this intrusion to the Lady at once."

Rough fists grabbed her by her arms and legs, hoisting her up, and at this, Washu rescinded all grip on her consciousness. As she felt herself being carried away from the strange black-stone statue, she uttered a sigh, and blackness rushed in to claim her.

"You know, I still don't understand why you insisted on taking the train home."

Ryoko glanced around Kurashiki station, raising an eyebrow at her fiance as they made their way through the crowded, noisy terminal. “It’s not like I couldn’t have got us back in an instant, and it would have cost us less, too. You’re strange sometimes, you know that? I don’t understand why you’d choose to use Earth machinery when there’s a quicker way.”

“I guess sometimes I like to just do things the way I always have done. That’s all.” Tenchi shrugged, a sheepish smile touching his lips. He grasped her gently by the hand, squeezing it tightly. “And I appreciate you humouring me. I know you could have used your magic to get us back from Osaka, Ryoko-chan — but this is the Earth and sometimes I just want to feel like another Earthling. You know?”

“Not really, but I’ll put it down to one of the quirks that make you you.” Ryoko said flippantly. “It was hot and stuffy on that train, and people kept giving me funny looks.”

“Well, you did decide to sprawl across the luggage rack, Ryoko.”

“Where else was I going to sit?” Ryoko defended herself. “The thing was packed. You stood half of the way. It was a waste of good space!”

Tenchi chuckled, shaking his head slowly as he remembered the journey from Osaka. It was true, he mused wryly, no matter how hard they tried to do Earth things, Ryoko would always bring her own special touch to proceedings. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, most Earth travellers probably couldn’t get up onto the racks. They’re pretty high up, so I guess that’s another reason you got stared at.” He suggested.

“Maybe.” Ryoko pouted. “It just figures, though. I don’t mind people staring at me — after all, I am one exceptionally pretty space pirate — but it wasn’t that kind of look. I swear, Tenchi, sometimes people on your planet are so rude.”

Tenchi laughed.

“I guess we still have a way to go before you’re familiar with everything this planet does or doesn’t offer.” He reflected, his grip on her hand tightening. “But that’s all right, you know. We’ve plenty of time.”

“Are you going to make us get the bus back, Tenchi-kun?” Ryoko looked plaintive, and Tenchi sighed, shaking his head in resignation.

“No, I guess I can compromise.” He said at length. “I really don’t like being teleported all that much — which is another reason I

wanted to take the train back. But I suppose you've humoured me this far. It's only fair that I give you your way in getting back from the station to the mountains. After all, I don't think there's another bus to the shrine for a good half hour or maybe more. It would be a waste of time to wait and I don't think I have enough change to buy you a coffee somewhere."

"Then I guess we're going home my way." Ryoko's eyes sparkled thoughtfully. "All right, Tenchi. I think the photo-booth is as good a place as any, if you don't want anyone to see us vanish."

"Two people in a photo booth might be interpreted in all kinds of funny ways, though." Tenchi said doubtfully. Ryoko's expression became one of playful amusement, and she nodded her head.

"All the better." She said teasingly. "Come on, Tenchi. You are my fiance, after all. It's not like it would be so very scandalous. Sometimes you worry way too much about other people's opinions. You're already holding my hand, after all. What's wrong with ducking into a photo booth together? We know we're only using it to go home without witnesses. Anyone who's sad enough to be watching us can draw their own conclusions. We don't work on their rules, after all. No matter how much you try to ignore it, we're not an average Earth couple and sometimes the things we do are beyond ordinary Earth comprehension."

"I guess I won't argue with that." Tenchi sighed, but allowed himself to be led across the bustling station complex towards one of the passport photo booths that stood against the wall adjacent to the ticket office. "All right. I give. I'm coming."

"That's a good boy." Ryoko's eyes twinkled with humour.

"I wonder if Washu's back at the shrine yet." As Ryoko pushed back the curtain of the booth, leading the way inside, Tenchi sank down thoughtfully on the tiny chamber's blue-coated seat, watching his fiancee yank the curtain closed behind them. "She's been on Airai a while, considering… did she tell you when she and Ryo Ohki were coming back?"

"No, and I haven't tried to reach Ryo Ohki much since they left." Ryoko admitted. "It's a long way, after all, and though I'm sure our bond could stretch that far, I didn't want to distract her when she might be flying. I know that Washu can pilot her, but she does a pretty lousy job compared to the way Ryo Ohki and I fly together. Ryo Ohki needs all her wits about her just to navigate, since she can't take psychic instructions from Washu."

“I’m sure they’ll be fine, you know.” Tenchi reflected, closing his eyes as he braced himself for the teleport. “All right, Ryoko. I’m ready. Get it over with.”

“Honestly, Tenchi, sometimes you are such a wimp.” Ryoko said reprovingly, but she obediently grabbed him by the shoulders, and Tenchi felt his molecules swirl and bend out of sequence as they whirled through space towards the mountain home. At length the world seemed to become still again, and he opened his eyes, finding himself seated on the grass outside the shrine. He sighed, rubbing his temples.

“It feels so weird, when you do that.”

“I know.” Ryoko hopped down beside him, offering him an unrepentant grin. “But it is only for a moment, even if you don’t like how it feels.”

“Doesn’t it freak you out, doing that to yourself all the time?”

“Nope.” Ryoko shook her head. “You see, Tenchi, I’ve been teleporting since almost before I can remember. It’s a natural impulse for me now, and it doesn’t worry me if I’m in control of my own atoms. But I know it sucks when someone else shifts you. I’ve been transferred by Washu and Hotsuma before, and I know what it feels like.”

“Sea sickness on a grand scale.” Tenchi muttered. “All right. I think I’m in one piece. I live in fear of part of me being left behind, that’s all. My body wasn’t built for teleportation — it isn’t like yours that way.”

“No, but you are a Prince of Jurai, so I do expect you to be less of a wuss about it.” Ryoko said unsympathetically. “We’re home, aren’t we? And I don’t know about you, but I’m getting hungry. I wonder if Yume’s around — and if she feels like cooking?”

“Hungry?” Tenchi faltered, then, “In a minute. Let me get to grips with myself first.”

“Oh, you really are hopeless.” Ryoko laughed, grabbing him by the hands and hauling him mercilessly to his feet. “There. Now you’re upright. Come on. Let’s go see what’s up. I’m just in the mood for some of Yume’s cooking, and we did spend three hours or more on that wretched train.”

“Yes, I know.” Tenchi agreed. “And I’m coming.”

As they made their way down towards the Masaki house that, many

years ago had been designed and built by Tenchi's father Noboyuki, Ryoko paused, a frown crossing her face as she gazed up towards the cloudless sky overhead. Tenchi's brows drew together as he glanced at his companion, trying to work out what was wrong.

"We stopped." He murmured. "Is something up? I thought you were hungry."

"Shh." Ryoko held up her hands, and Tenchi tilted his head on one side, eying her keenly. He did not speak, however, and at length Ryoko sighed, muttering a curse under her breath as she slowly shook her head.

"Well?" Tenchi asked softly.

"Ryo Ohki." Ryoko said frankly, irritation in her golden eyes. "She's been trying to make contact with me… I guess maybe she was out of range after all, or something was blocking our communication. I bet you anything you like it was all the heaving bodies in that damn train from Osaka… I couldn't hear myself think, let alone her. In any case, she's in something of a flurry. Come on, we need to find Yume, and I don't mean for dinner. I need to know where Ryo Ohki is contacting me from, and I need a way of getting there, fast."

"Erm, I think you skipped two pages at once." Tenchi objected, as his companion grabbed him by the hand, dragging him forcibly down the pathway towards the house. "Ryoko! Stop it! What's going on? Why do you need to get to Ryo Ohki — is she hurt?"

"She's agitated, and that's not a good sign." Ryoko said grimly. "No, Tenchi, I don't think she's hurt. It's Washu she's panicking about. Not herself. She keeps trying to send me the same message, over and over again."

"Washu?" Alarm flooded Tenchi's features, then, "Has something happened to her on Airai?"

"I don't think they're on Airai any more, but they're definitely on some kind of planet." Ryoko's lips thinned. "Tenchi, when Ryo Ohki gets herself worked up into a frenzy, it's hard to make any real sense of her thought waves. They come in fits and bursts and generally in a random, scrambled order. I'm trying to piece it all together, but I'm not sure exactly what's happened. Just that Washu is in some kind of trouble, and Ryo Ohki wants our help. She's moving — I can tell you that much, though I'm not sure if she's running on foot or if she's flying. As I said, she's too agitated to really be coherent, and if I'm not careful her panic will affect me, too… so I can't probe her thoughts any deeper than I already am."

“But something’s happened to Washu?”

“It looks that way.” Ryoko agreed grimly. “So we’re going to her lab and we’re going to find Yume. Damn woman! Why is it she can’t do anything on her own without getting into some kind of trouble! When she went to blow up Kihaku, she almost got herself killed. And now — God knows what’s happened to her now! For someone who’s lived as long as she has, she sure gets herself into stupid situations.”

Tenchi glanced at his companion, seeing the anxiety behind the annoyance in his fiancee’s expression, and he frowned, nodding his head.

“Then we’ll find Yume, and see if she can get a fix on Ryo Ohki’s whereabouts.” He said softly.

“The trouble is, even if I do manage to get that, I can’t go anywhere without my ship.” Ryoko sighed, pushing open the front door of the Masaki home and phasing them both through the entrance to Washu’s laboratory before Tenchi knew what was happening. “Yume? Yume, are you here? Dammit, you’d better answer me! If you’ve chosen today to go wandering in the mountains…”

“Ryoko?”

As Tenchi struggled to regain his composure after the unexpected sensation of being dragged through wood, a door shimmered and materialised in the far wall of the lab, swinging back to reveal a young woman, thick dark hair curling over her shoulders as she glanced between them with concerned violet eyes. Ryoko wasted no time, flickering herself out of view and re-materialising at the girl’s side as she grabbed her companion tightly around the wrists.

“Have you heard anything from Washu, Yume?” She demanded. The girl stared, eyes becoming wide with confusion as she registered the urgency in the pirate’s tone. Slowly she shook her head.

“No. Ryo Ohki’s made no contact with the Earth, but then she’s on Airai with this Najya friend of hers, isn’t she?” She said softly. “What’s wrong, Ryoko? You seem worried about something.”

“I’m not worried. I’m annoyed.” Ryoko snapped, her impatient tone proving Yume’s judgement to be correct as she dropped down into an empty seat. “You’ve had no contact at all? Not since she left the Earth?”

“None.” Yume shook her head. “She hasn’t sent any communication back here — but I really didn’t expect her to.”

“Ryoko thinks something’s happened to her.” Tenchi explained. “She’s had some kind of panicked psychic message from Ryo Ohki, and we’re trying to make sense of it.”

“Something’s happened?” Now Yume’s expression became one of alarm. “But what?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be asking you if *you* knew anything.” Ryoko muttered. “I’m not sure. Ryo Ohki is wound up, so she’s not being entirely clear. I think that they stumbled into some trouble on a planet Washu decided to make a stop-over on, on her way back home. But I don’t know where it is. If you could pick up Ryo Ohki’s signal… and we need a way to get there, because I really don’t know at the moment whether or not Ryo Ohki can get home.”

“I can try and trace Ryo Ohki’s ident, if she’s putting out a strong enough signal for me to detect it.” Yume said slowly, a troubled look crossing her face. “But as for getting to them — I don’t know. I’m not a spaceship, Ryoko, and I haven’t the first idea how to put one together. Certainly not in such a short space of time. I can fly through space on my own, but if we’re talking about some distance, I doubt you or Tenchi could sustain yourself in space for that length of time. Certainly Tenchi couldn’t, even with his Light Hawk Wings he hasn’t got the stamina to travel outside his normal environment for such a long trip. I’m sorry, Ryoko. I might be able to find out where they are — but I’m not sure that we could go to the rescue.”

“And that’s the best you can say?” Ryoko glanced up, sending the droid an accusatory look. “I thought you were meant to be some amazing invention, but right now you’re proving to be fairly useless! I thought you were a shape-shifter, Yume. Can’t you shape-shift into a spaceship?”

“Yes, by appearance, I could.” Yume sighed, leaning up against the panel of one of Washu’s computers as she considered the question. “But I don’t have the requisite battery power to maintain such a transformation for the length of time needed. More than that, it takes a lot of my energy to travel through space on my own steam. To have to do so transformed, and with your lives in the equation — I’m sorry, but it’s just not logical to try it. I’m not built to be that kind of shape-shifting droid. I’m supposed to imitate living things — people, animals, that kind of thing. Not spacecraft.”

“But Washu did say you were built on the same premise as Ryo Ohki — right?” Tenchi put in.

“Perhaps I was, but I was also built by Dr Clay, and with a different

end in mind." Yume spread her hands helplessly. "He wasn't the best scientist in the world. I have my limitations."

"Clearly." Ryoko sighed, rubbing her temples. "All right. So what are we meant to do then? I've got Ryo Ohki yapping at the back of my senses — what can I tell her?"

"Yume, you could contact Jurai, right?" Tenchi's eyes lit up with a sudden idea. "I mean, you could contact Sasami or Ayeka and tell them something has happened to Washu? Maybe they could spare us a ship, or some help, or something. After all, Washu has done a lot for Jurai in recent years. Surely they'd be glad to help, if they realised she was in trouble?"

"Jurai." Ryoko bit her lip, then she nodded. "You know, that might be a course of action. Much as I hate bringing that world into anything… Yume, could you do that? I mean, you're not so limited that you couldn't hook up a line to Jurai?"

"I can do that." Yume said quietly. "And there's no need to be so unpleasant to me, Ryoko. You have your limitations too, so don't start blaming me for mine."

Ryoko merely glowered, and Tenchi sighed.

"I'm sure that, considering the fact Washu helped Sasami on Yousai, the Council of Jurai would be happy to lend their assistance." He murmured. "Yume, I think that's the best course of action. If you can make contact with one of Jurai's ships, we can ask them for help in tracking down where she and Ryo Ohki are."

"Wait." Ryoko's head snapped up at this, and she held up her hands. "Wait a minute. Do nothing… hang on."

"Ryoko?" Tenchi stared, and Ryoko shook her head.

"Ryo Ohki's coming home." She said softly. "I can make it out now. We don't need Jurai — Ryo Ohki will be back here before too long and we can take it from her what's happened. She'll know where Washu is, and we'll be able to do something about it. Whatever mess she's gotten into — when Ryo Ohki's back, we'll know exactly what the situation is without involving that stupid tree-house planet."

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

“Hey, you! Up with you! Now!”

Washu opened her eyes, blinking as she brought the man into a blurry kind of focus. For a moment she wondered where she was, and how she had come to be in such a dark, dismal place. Then, as she dragged herself into a sitting position, her memories rushed back and she frowned, glancing instinctively around her for any sign of Ryo Ohki. The cabbit was nowhere to be seen, however, and she hoped inwardly that the creature had managed to escape the clutches of the guardsmen and their strange draining spell.

As she struggled to get to grips with her surroundings, the man who had spoken to her grabbed her roughly by the arm, yanking her to her feet and she stumbled, sending him a dark glare. He returned it with an impassive one of his own, and as he did so, her retort died on her tongue. His actions were animated and as normal as any other person she had ever seen, and yet his eyes were glassy and dull, as if under the spell of some greater power. She frowned, narrowing her eyes as she tried to remember what she’d overheard in the strange village. What kind of place was this? And most of all, why did the people seem to speak Kii?

“My people and my language have been dead for centuries. Milennia.” She reflected, as she found her wrists chained together by crude metal implements, fixed with a clasp that, at a glance, she knew she could escape in a moment. “And yet here, on this world, is a strange parody of my past. What does it mean?”

“Come with me!” The man seemed in no mood to dawdle, grabbing the chain and giving it a harsh tug in the direction of the cell door. Washu tripped over her feet and almost fell headlong as she realised her strength had not fully returned, but the man paid no attention to her struggles, merely setting off at a determined pace as he hauled his captive along behind him. To the indignant Washu, it was almost like she was a dog on a leash, and by the time they reached what she assumed was the end of the prison complex, she was bristling with anger. However, as soon as they stepped through the silver-gilted gate, her objections faded away inside of her as her gaze rested on the ornate chamber in which she now stood, elaborate carvings decorating

the walls and ceiling. Each was carefully and lovingly hand engraved, the work, she knew, of many skilled craftsmen, and many of the images were coloured in the reds, blues and greens of vegetable dyes. Despite herself, Washu's mind flitted back to one afternoon when she had been a small girl, playing merrily among the tubs of coloured dye as she had observed a group of men putting the finishing touches to an engraving for her father. The recollection surprised her, and she frowned, longing to run her fingers over the smooth, vivid colours once again.

"So, you are come before us, outlander."

The voice brought her back to herself with a jolt and she turned, seeing for the first time that the chamber was not empty. On the platform at the back, surrounded by the flickering of candle flame sat a figure, shrouded in a dark cloak. From beneath her hood, two glittering eyes peered out, as if assessing her appearance, and Washu immediately knew that this was not someone to be reasoned with or trusted. She frowned, clenching her fists instinctively as she fought to control her composure and her fear. The darkness that emanated from this being went beyond that of anyone she had ever before met, and with a flash of realisation, she knew without a doubt that this time she had truly encountered a demon.

"I always believed that demons were really people who had turned to the side of evil." She muttered, forcing herself to meet the glowing gaze with casual equanimity. "But I was wrong. This is no human being. This is evil like I've never seen it, and damnit, it scares me just to look at her."

"You do speak, I presume?"

The voice came again, still speaking in perfect, if accented Galactic Tongue, and Washu registered that it was that of a woman, although strangely hoarse and husky. The guardsman who had escorted her gave her a brusque shove at this juncture, catching her off guard and forcing her to her knees. She raised her gaze again, and the creature rose to her feet, surrounded by billowing black fabric as she gazed down on her prey.

"The guards said that you do." She continued, in thoughtful, contemplative tones. "They could not understand your words, Outlander. They are simple folk. But I'm sure that I shall. So speak to me, stranger. Tell me who you are, and what business you have here on Rikishouki."

So it had been the name of the planet. Washu made a mental note

of this, summoning her courage as she offered the dark shape a smile.

“I’m not quite sure what’s going on here.” She said evenly. “I just stopped here to gather fuel for my spaceship. I got lost on my way back from Airai, and strayed into the orbit of your planet. I mean you and your people no harm, I’m sure. I’m just a traveller, passing through.”

“A traveller, you say?” The gleaming eyes narrowed, as if absorbing this information. “How did you find this world, then, traveller? And you have not yet told me your name.”

“Nor have you told me yours.” Washu replied calmly. “And I’m sure that there’s no great mystery of how I found your pretty planet. I flew right past it — it seemed a good place to stop and look for fuel.”

“Isao!” The creature’s head jerked in the direction of the waiting guard, who stood stiffly to attention at the sound of his name. “Did the woman have a spaceship? Have you taken custody of a devil-craft as well?”

This last was spoken in rapid, if accented Kii, and Washu frowned, trying to follow the woman’s odd intonation. The guard shook his head, making a fervent gesture against possession as he did so.

“No devil craft has been found, Lady Yuzuha.” He replied, bowing his head as if in deference to her status, but the glassy look in his eyes told Washu there was more to this relationship than simple mistress and servant. “We continue to search, but so far the stranger’s manner of arrival has not been found.”

“I see.” The orb-like eyes narrowed again, and the dark shape turned her attention back to the hapless Washu.

“My man says you brought no craft.” She said softly. “How, then, did you manage to land? Speak the truth to me, traveller. Your fate may depend on your cooperation.”

Washu frowned. Well, she had ascertained one thing — as yet, Ryo Ohki had escaped their attention. She shrugged her shoulders.

“My ship is small, you probably just overlooked it.” She said casually. “It has an automatic cloaking device, which means it can’t always be seen without the right unlock codes. I’m not sure where I left it, exactly — this planet is totally new to me, and I got a bit disorientated. But how else would I have got here, if I didn’t have a ship? I can’t fly through space without one, you know. That would be stupid.”

The creature seemed to think this over for a moment, then she nodded her head slowly.

“Perhaps.” She said softly. “We shall see. This is not a planet which welcomes outsiders. The people here have suffered much in the past, and I am their protector against the ills of the greater universe. They have been victims of powerful empires and they look to me for constancy and support. You are not one of them, therefore you are their enemy.”

“I mean noone any trouble.” Washu held up her hands in a gesture of submission. “In fact, if you like, I’ll leave right now. Be out of your hair in a flash, I’m sure… just as soon as I find my ship.”

“No.” The woman shook her head, and Washu thought she saw a faint glimpse of fur beneath the heavy cloak. “That will not do. You might bring others here. People who will hurt my followers and infiltrate this world with their language and their culture. You may have come here by accident, traveller… but you shall not leave it. Make up your mind to stay here — your residency here will be until the end of your days.”

There was a nasty inflection in her final words, and Washu’s gaze narrowed as she realised the implications.

“So you kill innocent passers by?” She challenged. “Is that what you’re going to do to me now? Kill me?”

“That depends on whether I find another use for you, first.” The creature seemed amused. “It provides entertainment, and keeps my people’s fear of outsiders placated. Perhaps. But I may yet be merciful. You are a fool, but you are not the one I seek. Therefore, for the time being, I shall let you live. If you should prove useful to me, I may yet spare your life — so consider how you address me, traveller. My name is Yuzuha, Priestess of Rikishouki. And you will give me your name.”

Washu frowned, shaking her head.

“Where I come from, a person can be hexed by the giving of their name.” She said frankly. “And I was taught never to reveal it to anyone, unless they were proven to be friend. So I cannot oblige you, Lady Yuzuha. I have not your strength or confidence — I suspect there is little I could do to harm you, but much you could do to hurt me, if you so chose.”

“Ah, so you are a sensible woman after all.” Yuzuha seemed taken aback at this. “You are aware that I wield power, are you?”

“You must, to gain the loyalty and admiration of so many people.”

Washu said quietly. “It takes more than good leadership to calm the fears of a frightened planet. This place seems very different from anywhere I’ve ever been before. Is that your doing, Lady Yuzuha? Truly, if you wish me to stay, would you not tell me something about your world? After all, it seems I have no way of leaving.”

“There is no reason to tell an outsider such information.” Yuzuha dismissed her request with a flicker of her fingers, and Washu was aware of the glint of gold jewellery for a brief instant. “You will return to your cell, and you will stay there until I decide what to do with you.”

She gestured to Isao, who moved to retake control of his captive, and Washu put up her hands, shaking her head.

“Wait.” She said. “Please. At least tell me one thing, Priestess Yuzuha, before you lock me away in that horrible dark place again?”

“Well?” The shadow paused, as if assessing her companion anew, and Washu injected just the right note of fear and respect into her tones as she continued in a calmer, more amicable manner.

“At least tell me what language it is these people speak.” She said softly. “And what all these pictures mean. They’re so beautiful — art like nothing else in the universe. I’d love to know who created them and why.”

At this Yuzuha stiffened, lifting her gaze to the ceiling, and then letting out a snort of derision.

“Cave paintings.” She muttered. “These are ancient art, nothing more. The world of people dead long before our lifetimes. I told you, the people here are primitive and look to me for protection. I am their sole defence against invasion and attack. I have no affinity with this art — it is just random graffiti in my eyes.”

“So you don’t know what it means?” Washu asked softly. Yuzuha spread her hands.

“Why is it so important to you, traveller?” She asked suspiciously. “What business is it of yours to know the ways of my people, anyway?”

“None whatsoever, except you want to make me one of them.”

“I may yet kill you.”

“Not if I can prove useful to you.” Washu eyed her earnestly, gauging her companion’s behaviour all the time.

“My people are the Kii.” Yuzuha spoke at length, censure clear in her tone. “They were slaves, prisoners, call them what you will. This was their utopia, but they lacked guidance and lived a heathen, base existance. They put faith in a God who does not exist, and suffered because of it. Then I came to this world, and I showed them what true leadership should be. They none of them turn to their old God now. I am all they need to look to, when they want a miracle.”

Washu bit her lip, shaking her head slowly.

“But Kihaku… doesn’t exist any more.” She said falteringly. “All the people… all the people died.”

“Not *all* the people, traveller.” Yuzuha’s eyes narrowed until they were mere slits, flickers of fire glittering between her lids. “This world is testament to that fact.”

“But I…”

“Enough questions!” Yuzuha thundered, holding up her hands. “Isao, take the prisoner back to her cell. We shall reconvene in the morning to decide her fate!”

This last instruction was given in broken, demanding Kii, and Washu almost winced at the bad use of grammar, but the guard acted at once, retrieving his grip on the chains as he pulled Washu back towards the doorway.

“All right, already. I can walk, you know.” She muttered, but she put up no resistance, inwardly reeling with the information Yuzuha had given her.

“Not all the people.” She murmured, as she was thrown back into her cell, the door clanging shut behind her. “But how is that? The Kii didn’t have technology. They didn’t build spaceships. Any Kii who left Kihaku went to Jurai. Like… like me. Wherever they went in the universe after that, they weren’t really Kii any more, they’d changed. But this world… it could be Kihaku. The language, the people, the landscape… it’s like a mirror image of the world I grew up on, long ago. Is this whole experience some kind of prolonged hallucination? Did I get exposed to something toxic on Airai that’s made me dream up this place’s existance? Noone here has the kind of technology to travel through space — that much is clear. And yet, how can Yuzuha be lying to me? I didn’t sense that she was lying. Evil she might be — and evil to a great degree — but she believed that her people were the Kii, and that means… well, what does it mean? She’s not a Kii, that’s for sure. She’s a demon and she’s taken this world in her grip somehow.”

She sighed, glancing at her hands as she absently tried to rub off the cell-dust.

“For the time being, I’ll sit tight.” She decided. “If these people are Kii, then they’re not exactly like the people I left behind. If they were, one of them would have realised when they met me that I had magic of some nature, and they would have told this Yuzuha. She didn’t detect my power, and nor did they. So they might not have Kii sight. I suppose that, if that is only born of Kihaku’s people, that generations growing up somewhere else wouldn’t have it in such a strong way. Over the generations, perhaps it could die out — I wish I had understood more the impact Kihaku’s core had on the ordinary population. I’m almost certain now, thinking about it, that Kii sight was generated by prolonged exposure to Kii mineral compounds. But then Ryoko definitely has shades of it, and she never went to Kihaku, even when we sought Tokimi. And then there’s Zakari, Tokimi’s own son — he was born from her genetic material when she was saturated with Kii magic, and he has Kii sight, also, in his odd violet eye. Yet I’m not sure he’s ever been to Kihaku, either. Perhaps it’s just a matter of generations — if Yuzuha is correct, and the original settlers did come from Kihaku somehow — we must be going milennia back into the past. Back to when I was a child — back to when people first started to flee the climatic changes and Tokimi’s wrath.”

She frowned, shuffling up against the wall of the cell as she sought to make herself more comfortable.

“This room is awful.” She decided with a sigh, eying her cuffs with a grimace. “And these are awkward. I think I’ll do without them, at the very least.”

She focused her thoughts, phasing her atoms through the cuffs as they clattered to the ground and for a moment she froze, afraid that the noise may have alerted a guard to her actions. There was no immediate flurry, however, and she realised with a mixture of relief and dismay that she was quite alone, isolated in the dark dungeon of some old building.

“Some old Kii building, if those pictures are anything to go by.” She realised, her eyes widening as she remembered the images that adorned the roof of the other chamber. “One of them was an eagle. No wonder they looked familiar. It didn’t occur to me in there, surrounded by all that dark evil. But it was an eagle, and not just any eagle. It was Kihaku’s eagle. Maybe Yuzuha is right. Perhaps there are more Kii in the universe than just Tokimi and I, after all.”

She frowned, reflecting again on the demon woman’s words.

“She said that I wasn’t the one she sought.” She murmured. “So she’s looking for someone — or something. A friend or an enemy? Someone dangerous, or someone that she considers a threat to her — something that would break her hold on this place? That man Isao, he was under some kind of a spell. I wonder if all the native people are like that, or whether any of them have any free thought. I doubt they willingly abandoned their own culture to follow someone like her — even with no Kii sight, I’m sure it’s fairly obvious she’s not to be trusted. She might call the Kii heathen, but I know that they’re not so stupid as all that.”

She smiled ruefully as she realised how indignant she felt at the creature’s implications.

“My, I am getting patriotic.” She murmured. “Calm down, Washu. You’ve not identified yourself with Kihaku in any major way for a long time — and why was that? Why did you seek to hide it from everyone at the Academy? Because you too believed your people were savages. It’s only since you started re-reading the Kii texts in the Juraian library, and since you managed to help Tokimi recover that you’ve started to see your heritage in any other way than inferior. I can’t blame an outsider — even a demon — for sharing that opinion. The truth is that the Kii are unique, and I didn’t bother to learn all that I could have when I had the chance.”

She ran her fingers along the edges of the bricks that confined her, pursing her lips.

“I could phase out of here if I wanted to, so for now it’s as well to stay put and listen hard.” She decided. “Whatever they did to me when I arrived, that wasn’t Kii magic… it must be associated with the demon. But I’ll be ready the next time, and I’ll stay alert. I’m sure that if need be I can escape, and fortunately for me, Yuzuha seemed to believe that I couldn’t travel in space without a ship. I’d not like to push myself too far, but I imagine I could hide up there for a short time at least, and maybe get aboard some passing craft or other, if need be. But right now I’m curious. Ryo Ohki has probably gone to the Earth and no doubt she’ll find help from Ryoko and Tenchi if she can. In the meantime, I’ve a chance to learn something about this strange Rikishouki planet. And I wouldn’t be any kind of a scientist if I didn’t take that opportunity. No, for the time being, I’m fine right here. Help may come when it can, but for now, I’ll just wait.”

The wind flitted idly through the trees, teasing old leaves from the branches as they fell daintily into a carpet of browns and golds on the

forest floor. The dying evening sun glinted and shimmered across the ground, creating odd shadows as it sought to return to its nightly sleep, and Mayuka slipped silently between the tree trunks, determination in her eyes as she hurried towards the edge of the densely packed trees. From somewhere deep in the heart of the forest, something shone and glistened with an unearthly, ethereal light and as Mayuka drew closer, she saw that it was a woman, dressed in the flowing robes of a Priestess and with the coronet of Kihaku atop her brow.

As Mayuka paused at the edge of the clearing, transfixed by the vision that hovered before her, the woman turned, seemingly registering her presence for the first time. Shining green eyes met her own awestruck fuschia ones, and Mayuka swallowed hard, struggling to keep her composure in the presence of the one she now knew was the woman her people had long sought. The stranger's complexion was delicately pale, but there was a gentle flush to her cheeks which told of an enthusiasm for life and a special, unquantifiable vivacity lurked in those emerald green eyes. The woman appeared agelessly young, with an upturned nose cheeky to the tip and long, flowing waves of vivid red hair that fluttered out behind her like a halo in the gentle autumn breeze. At her throat she wore a chain of gold, its pendant marked with an unfamiliar character, and the gentle blue-purple and teal of her outfit resembled the ancient carvings and drawings she had seen in the images left by her ancestors, rendered in vivid dyes on stone and paper as the people of the past sought to give life to their work. It was a robe worn by only one type of person, and Mayuka's heart skipped a beat as she recognised its meaning.

"Miko." She dropped to her knees, using the ancient tribal word as she gazed up at the apparition before her. The woman smiled, her entire face lighting up at that simple gesture, and Mayuka drew breath sharply as a feeling of power and warmth washed over her. The woman held out her hand, and hesitantly, Mayuka took it, allowing the figure to lift her gently to her feet.

"You are the Priestess, aren't you?" She whispered. "The Priestess of Kihaku — the Eagle's true representative among men?"

Slowly the woman nodded, light shimmering off her wild ruby hair as she did so.

"The Great Eagle sent you to save us, I know he did." Mayuka murmured. "Please, Priestess, tell me your name. Tell me what to call you, so that all my people will know in who they must place their trust!"

The woman smiled again, and for a moment Mayuka thought the woman would not answer her. Then, gently, she shook her head.

“But why not? I don’t understand?” Mayuka grasped at the Priestess’s hands, and the woman tilted her head on one side, eying her companion gently. Then she withdrew her fingers from the girl’s desperate grip, brushing her touch gently against her companion’s brow.

“You must have faith.” She whispered softly, every word echoing through Mayuka’s heart as she spoke. “You must believe in me. If you do, then I will come, and all will be made clear.”

“We do believe!” Mayuka protested. “Priestess, please… all our faith rests on you! We aren’t strong and we aren’t brave. We have limited people to fight for the freedom of our world. But when the invaders came before, the World rose up and expelled them. The World allowed us to survive, and begin anew on this planet. Now, we have life and we have each other — but the demon threatens to steal everything we’ve worked for. In the name of the Eagle, this world needs your help.”

The woman spread her hands, gentle glitters of light cascading to the ground as she did so, and before Mayuka’s disbelieving gaze the jaded, old leaves that littered the floor parted to reveal fresh green shoots beneath. Stunned, Mayuka whispered a soft prayer, unable to turn her gaze from her companion as the light around the woman’s form grew brighter and stronger.

“There is a legend.” She said quietly. “A story passed down by our people for generations. That though Kihaku was abandoned, the true Priest’s tribe did not die. That one day, you’d come back to us, all of you — one of you — to save us from being enslaved once again. That the World would never forsake us, as we have never forsaken the World. Please tell me, Priestess, if you tell me nothing else. Are you truly the one that the legend speaks of? Are you really the blood descendant of the Hakubi?”

The woman smiled a knowing smile, then she offered Mayuka a wink. In that instant she seemed once more mischievous and young — less than ten years older than Mayuka herself — and then, in a moment, she was gone in a blaze of blue light. Mayuka stumbled forwards, trying to grab a hold of the woman’s ethereal gown, but it was to no avail, and she fell forward, her palms making contact with the grass as she struggled to contemplate the illusion she had seen.

“Priestess of Kihaku, daughter of the Hakubi.” She whispered. “I believe in you. I believe in you! I know you will come to save my people from Yuzuha. I know you will!”

“Mayuka?”

A man’s voice jerked through her senses at that moment, and the

world seemed to sway and twist around her as something shook her hard. “Mayuka, wake up! I need to speak to you — wake up!”

“Huh?” Mayuka’s eyes flittered open as the autumn forest disappeared. She frowned, taking in the close-knit environment of her chamber and she sighed, pulling herself into a sitting position as she cast her companion a quizzical look. Tadashi stood at her bedside, one hand on her shoulder and at the anxiety in his eyes, she felt her initial indignation fading.

“Tadashi.” She murmured. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

“I couldn’t wake you.” Tadashi sat down on the edge of her worn feather-stuffed matress, eying her in consternation. “Are you all right? It was like you were deep in some trance.”

“A… trance?” Mayuka blinked, then a faint smile touched her lips. She rubbed absently at her bracelets, nodding her head.

“Perhaps it was a trance.” She admitted. “I was having a really intense dream, Tadashi. A dream about the Priestess — the Priestess of Kihaku.”

“Kihaku.” Tadashi looked sad, shaking his head. “Listen, Mayuka, I know that you still believe she’ll come and save us. But Kihaku — well, our people left there a long time ago. The Priestess that ravaged the world is probably dead. There is no Priestess now… just us. You can’t lose yourself in dreams… we need you. You know that — you’re the heiress to this place and we have to be focused.”

“But I’m sure it wasn’t just a dream.” Mayuka sighed, frustration in her fuschia eyes. “I’m sorry, Tadashi, but you didn’t see it. I could feel the woman’s fingers in my grip, and I could smell the incense on the wind. And I’m sure… I’m sure that she blessed me, because I felt this sense of warmth and hope and I knew… I just knew she was the one we were waiting for. You know what the old stories say, after all.”

“Old stories? Mayuka, not this again.” Tadashi shook his head, but Mayuka pushed him aside, slipping off the bed as she crouched beneath the wooden frame for the book she wanted. Old, tattered and in places, charred by the desecration of the temple, the volume was both ancient and delicate, and she heaved it up onto her covers with some difficulty, even as her companion sighed, reaching in his pocket for flint to light the chamber’s torch. Mayuka turned the pages carefully, pausing as she reached the one she wanted. Gently and reverently she ran her finger down the side of the passage.

“The Hakubi.” She murmured. “The tribe of Kihaku. The ones

blessed with the powers of the World. Tadashi, you know this is no story. Our people came here and they wrote these things down. The texts have been reinscribed for generations — our entire culture, our language, everything. This is where it stems from. The Hakubi tribe."

"Who died out when Kihaku was abandoned… because of the invasion of the Settler people." Tadashi folded his arms across his uniform. "It was many, many years ago, Mayuka, and no Hakubi ever set foot on Rikishouki. It was before the lifetimes of our parents or grandparents or even beyond that."

"I know." Mayuka nodded her head, meeting his gaze with an earnest one of her own. "But even so, the stories are so vivid that I believe in them. Tadashi, you know that when I'm trapped down here, I don't have much to do but read about our past and learn about our ancestors. The last Priestess of Kihaku was called on by the World to rid its surface of the Settlers. But the texts mention someone else, right here. When they talk about the old Priest — the father of the Priestess who cleansed our world. There's another name, written in truly ancient script. I can only read it as Eagle Feather, but I still know that it's her. And I'm sure of it — the woman in my dream. It was her."

"Mayuka." Tadashi slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Listen. Much as I want to agree with you, I don't know if I can. You said yourself that you've read and re-read these texts a lot. It's natural for you to dream about things you've read — we all know that such things happen. You know the volume is old, and we don't know the meanings for all of the characters our ancestors used to write with, even now. There are things which remain mystery, even to us… you don't even know that you've correctly read the text, considering you can't even make out if that word is a name or something else. Prophesies come, true enough. But since Yuzuha took control of our planet, noone has called on the Eagle for a prophesy successfully. I wonder if maybe he turned away from us, when she came. That once again we'd been weak and failed him, allowing invading forces to come into our world."

"I don't believe the Eagle has ever forsaken us." Mayuka said firmly, as her mind flitted back to her odd experience in the temple. "I think the World sent the meteor as an omen, and I'm sure these bracelets you gave me are made from special, divine rock. Something that allows the Eagle to speak to us, and instruct us in what to do. The Priestess must be alive, because otherwise, why would I see such a vivid image? I know she's out there, Tadashi. I don't know how, but I believe. And I really want you to, as well."

Tadashi frowned, slipping his hand beneath his uniform as he extracted the shard of blue-grey ore that hung on a silver chain around his neck.

“This stone does protect me from Yuzuha’s control spell.” He acknowledged. “Maybe you are right. Maybe I’m just too quick to doubt and judge.”

“You said you wanted to speak to me — has something happened?” Mayuka questioned. Tadashi nodded.

“Some of the men captured a stranger in the military village.” He agreed. “An outlander — she doesn’t speak our language, and Yuzuha has her confined. I think she’ll be put to death — from the conversations I overheard, Yuzuha seems to be ready to sacrifice another to the flames.”

“Travellers don’t come here often.” Mayuka frowned. “Does she know that by killing any outsider who arrives here, she keeps alive the fear everyone else has of invasion? Or is that the point?”

“Probably.” Tadashi looked grim. “Come to think of it, she does insist on viewing each captive before she passes sentence. It’s as if she’s looking for something, or someone. Something she’s afraid of facing… but I don’t know what. Yuzuha is the most powerful creature on Rikishouki. Nothing can challenge her. Even if I did break her enchantment over me with this chain and with your belief in me, most people aren’t so lucky. And breaking the spell doesn’t begin to challenge her might.”

Mayuka’s eyes opened wide with surprise and realisation, and she grabbed her companion around the wrists, her book forgotten.

“Tadashi!” She breathed. “What if it’s the Priestess? We know Yuzuha came from outside — what if she knows about the Priestess and that’s who she doesn’t want to face? Maybe she knows that our Priestess will come for us, and that the Eagle of Kihaku will still fight for our freedom. Do you think that’s why she’s so keen to kill anyone from outside this world?”

“I don’t know.” Tadashi admitted. “And we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. She’s a dangerous force… it would take something pretty incredible to beat her.”

“But this woman in my vision, she was.” Mayuka whispered. “She was glowing with energy and light. I can’t explain it… I just knew. She could help us. She could save us all.”

“Even if you are right, Mayuka, how would we find such a being?”

Tadashi asked helplessly. Mayuka frowned, pursing her lips.

“We need to free the traveller.” She said at length. “If she’s from outside our world, she must have one of those strange contraptions like the one that brought our people here in the first place. And if so… if so…”

She faltered, then nodded her head.

“If she does have one, we have to make her help us.” She decided. “We’ll help her become free, if she’ll use her magic craft and help us find our Priestess. Then Rikishouki will be free again and Yuzuha will be gone, once and for all!”

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

It was late in the evening by the time Ryo Ohki returned to the earth, and as Ryoko waited impatiently at the shrine for her spaceship's arrival, pacing the grass outside the old building as she glanced up at the sky. At first there was nothing, but then she was aware of a buzz of activity crossing her senses, and a bright light glimmered out of the darkness, growing greater and greater as with a yowl of relief Ryo Ohki broke through the Earth's atmosphere. As she drew nearer to the shrine itself, she shimmered and morphed herself into her cabbit form, landing deftly in Ryoko's outstretched hands as she raised her gaze anxiously to her mistress. Ryoko frowned, ruffling the cabbit's wind-tousled fur as she did so.

"So what has she done this time?" She murmured. "You seem all right, Ryo Ohki — but I'm surprised you'd leave her behind. What did she do? Can you calm down and tell me?"

Ryo Ohki mewed, her ears drooping as she rested her head on her paws, and Ryoko's frown deepened.

"I see. She made you leave." She said thoughtfully. "So what you're telling me is that something or someone managed to overpower Washu and take her prisoner. You escaped, and she wanted you to come back here and tell Tenchi and I what had happened. Is that it?"

Ryo Ohki nodded her head mournfully, and Ryoko sighed.

"Fine." She said resignedly, tightening her grip on her companion as she flickered out of view, re-materialising outside the Masaki home. "Then we need to talk to Tenchi, too. Can you tell me anything about this place Washu is, Ryo Ohki? Do you know what it's called — anything at all? Do you think you could find it again, if we were to fly there?"

Ryo Ohki hesitated, and Ryoko detected a flicker of uncertainty darting across her companion's senses. As she phased them both through the wall of the house and into the main lounge, she met Ryo Ohki's gaze with a thoughtful one of her own.

"You really have no idea what this place is, do you?" She asked softly. "You went there, and Washu got into trouble… but you can't tell me what planet it is, because it's not in your navigation banks."

Ryo Ohki shook her head, looking even more dejected, and Ryoko sighed.

“Well, tell me what you can tell me.” She said finally. “You must have some vague idea where it’s located, since you’ve been there. And tell me what exactly happened to Washu, all right? She’s no weakling, and she’s wary as hell. How was it she was so easily overpowered? That bothers me more than a little — that she’d give up without a fight.”

Ryo Ohki flicked her ears, and Ryoko nodded.

“We’ve got all night to talk.” She agreed. “So start at the beginning, Ryo Ohki. Then, tomorrow morning, we’ll go see if we can’t find my mother.”

“You know, Tokimi, you’ve really got a knack for weaving flowers.”

Sasami stretched out on the grass outside the Tennan estate, resting her chin in her hands as she observed the intricate blossom patterns the young Kii was busily putting the finishing touches to. “You must have done this kind of thing a lot on Kihaku, huh? You picked it up so quickly, you must have done it before. I think you have a real talent for it.”

“I like flowers.” Tokimi set her work aside, offering the Princess a bright smile. “On Kihaku, Tokimi always picked flowers. Always.”

“I guess Kihaku must have been a pretty planet, when you were there.” Suki reflected, leaning back against the trunk of an old tree as she contemplated. “I wish I could have seen it, Tokimi. I’m sure it was amazing to see, when in full bloom.”

“Kihaku was pretty.” Tokimi’s eyes softened at the memory. “But flowers are special. Not just pretty. Important, too. So Tokimi likes to weave flowers, because they matter.”

“They matter in what way?” Sasami was curious. “Do you mean like the Jurai trees, Tokimi? That flowers on Kihaku had some kind of special magic?”

Tokimi shrugged, shaking her head.

“The World was Kihaku’s magic.” She said seriously. “But the flowers, they helped people. Red flowers for spirit. Yellow for hope. Blue for healing. White for peace. Pink for love. Purple for fortune. Black for memory. Silver for protection. All colours, all types… every flower important.”

“I see.” Suki looked startled. “So you’re saying that all these patterns you weave mean something symbolically? That when you were on Kihaku, you’d use these to mark particular moods and well, events?”

“Yes.” Tokimi dimpled. “And other things, too. See, look. Watch.”

Carefully she took a pink flower, setting it down on the ground.

“Suki’s flower.” She said earnestly.

“My flower?” Suki looked non-plussed, hesitating then scooping up the blossom in her fingers. “What do you mean?”

Tokimi dimpled, touching the petals of the pink bloom gently.

“In Kii, Suki is love.” She said softly. Suki looked surprised.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know that.” Suki looked pensive, glancing down at the flower she still clutched in her hands. “My name was chosen by my father. Its an old family name — there have been Suki Tennans before me, though not for many generations. In Old Era Juraian, it means revered spirit, or something like that. It was the name of Senichi Tennan’s daughter, and my father had a keen affinity with that particular one of my ancestors. He didn’t want a daughter — he wanted a second son to name Senichi, but he had me instead, so he settled for the next best thing. I didn’t know it had another meaning.”

“I think that’s really nice to know.” Sasami said pensively. “That your name could mean something so pretty, Suki. I mean, the Juraian meaning is pretty enough. But somehow I like it better, the way Tokimi says it.”

Tokimi sighed, looking wistful.

“On Kihaku, each flower means something special.” She admitted. “On Jurai, flowers are not the same. So Tokimi isn’t sure… if they still work. There are no Suki flowers on Jurai. So…”

“It doesn’t matter.” Suki assured her. “It’s the thought behind it that’s important.”

“The whole idea is so cool.” Sasami said decidedly. “No wonder you like flowers so much. What about me, Tokimi? What would *my* flower be?”

Tokimi hesitated, then she smiled, shaking her head.

“Tokimi has no gold flowers.” She murmured. “Sasami is a gold flower, because she is a kami-sama. Gold flowers did not grow much on Kihaku, but they grew at the temples of the World. They were the flower of the Eagle of Kihaku. So Sasami has a gold flower.”

“A gold flower, huh?” Sasami grinned. “All right. And you, Tokimi? What about you?”

Tokimi glanced down at her flowers.

“Visiting rare depths.” She murmured. “Tokimi’s name. Flowers for Tokimi grow on Kihaku. Tokimi doesn’t know… what flowers on Jurai mean Tokimi.”

“That’s what your name means?” Sasami looked startled. Tokimi nodded.

“To-Ki-Mi.” She agreed, carefully enunciating her syllables as she scratched the characters for her name in the sandy ground that surrounded the base of the tree. “See? Visit. Rare. Deep. Those are Tokimi’s name pictures. Like that.”

Sasami glanced at them, and as she did so, an odd sensation welled up inside of her. Suddenly giddy, she put out a hand to steady herself against the trunk of the old tree, closing her eyes as she sought to reorder her thoughts. As she did so, an image flashed across her senses, blue flame flickering and dancing upwards and as she drew breath sharply, she realised that there was a figure hidden deep within the flames. She struggled to see more, catching the briefest glimpse of the woman’s face before the pictures were pulled away from her senses, replaced by a sequence of odd, dizzying symbols that she could not understand.

“Sasami-chan?” Suki’s voice broke through her dazed, dizzy state and she struggled to focus on her friend’s words, forcing herself to open her eyes. As she did so, she met Suki’s concerned gaze, and she sighed, sinking back against the tree.

“That was too strange.” She murmured. “I looked at Tokimi’s writing, and then it was like… like I left this place completely. And… there was a fire, but the flames were blue. And someone was surrounded by the fire. Suki, I think… I think it was Washu, but… but I’m not sure. I only caught a brief glimpse. Then all these strange symbols overwhelmed me and I couldn’t see properly any more.”

“Washu-neechan?” Tokimi murmured, and glancing at her, the princess saw that colour had drained from the girl’s cheeks. “In… blue fire?”

She flickered her fingers, as if warding off some unseen evil.

“It was just a hallucination, Tokimi. Nothing else.” Suki said hastily, but Sasami shook her head.

“I don’t know. It was… vivid and strange.” She admitted. “I… don’t feel all that steady. Suki, I’m not sure I can get up.”

“I’ll go get Seiryo.” Suki decided, getting to her feet and smoothing down her skirt. “He can lift you and you can lie down inside for a while. The sun is bright and we’ve been out for a while. It might just be that.”

“Maybe.” Sasami agreed doubtfully. “All right. If he doesn’t mind… I do feel funny.”

Suki flashed her a smile.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be right back.” She promised. “Tokimi, look after Sasami for me, will you?”

Tokimi nodded, her blue eyes shadowed. Then, as the young noblewoman ran off across the grass, the former priestess turned her attention to the Princess.

“Tell me about the pictures.” She begged. “About Washu-neechan. About the fire.”

“Tokimi, I didn’t mean to scare you.” Sasami sighed, rubbing her temples. “It might just be too much sun. Your writing is complicated and it made my eyes go all funny.”

She frowned, hesitating, then reaching across to run her own finger through the sand, carefully and painstakingly inscribing from memory the characters that had flooded her senses. As she did so, Tokimi let out a gasp, her hand flying to her mouth and she grasped at Sasami’s hand, panic in her eyes as she forcibly pulled the girl’s fingers away from the soil.

“No more.” She begged. “No more, Sasami! Please!”

“What is it?” Sasami looked startled. “I just wanted to see if I could make any sense of it. I know that Seiryo has a lot of experience with codes and symbols, and I thought he might be able to tell me what it meant — after all, if Washu is in trouble…”

“Washu-neechan.” Tokimi bit her lip, her hands trembling as she glanced down at the symbols in the dirt.

“Tokimi?” Sasami murmured. “What is it? What’s on your mind?”

Tokimi bit her lip, gesturing to Sasami's clumsy scribbles.

"You must not write this." She said softly. "It is not good to write."

"Wait… you mean *you* can read it?" Sasami stared. "It… is it *Kii*?"

Tokimi nodded her head, clearly agitated.

"Then can you tell me what it means? I don't understand it at all, Tokimi — why has it upset you so much?"

"Tokimi swallowed hard, a troubled look on her pretty face.

"*The world does not begin*." She said softly, tracing her finger in a line alongside the characters as she did so. "*The world does not end. All are subject to the world, sheltered beneath the wings of the… the eagle kami-sama*."

"The eagle… *God*?" Sasami's eyes widened. "Is that what it really says?"

Tokimi nodded her head soberly.

"Eagle is Kihaku. Is protector of Kihaku… Kihaku spirit." She said quietly.

Sasami frowned, her mind brought back to the conflict within the dying planet and the spectral form of the Eagle that Tokimi had drawn on to defend herself. She nodded.

"I guess that makes sense."

"But Eagle is gone." Tokimi continued. "Kihaku is gone. Is not good to write this."

"But why not?" Sasami was confused. "It sounds like a prayer. Why is it so bad?"

"Because it is prayer for death, that's all." Tokimi looked haunted. "The prayer of the Priest when someone returns to the World. When they… when they are dead."

"Princess Sasami!"

At that moment, Seiryo's voice interrupted the conversation, and Sasami glanced up, seeing her advisor hurrying across the grass towards her, his sister in tow. He dropped at her side, eying her in concern as he took in her pallor.

"You look faint, Princess." He said softly. "Is Suki right? Have you been affected by the sun?"

“No… I don’t think it was sun.” Sasami looked troubled, shaking her head. “Seiryo, I had a… a picture. A vision… maybe. I don’t even know if it’s real. It doesn’t mean much to me. But these… these symbols flooded through my head and I couldn’t shake them. I wrote them down, because I thought you might be able to interpret them. But when I did…”

She bit her lip, holding out a hand to Tokimi as she did so.

“Tokimi can read the pictures I wrote down.” She said softly. “And it upset her, what I wrote. She said… she said it was something to do with death.”

“*Tokimi* can?” Seiryo looked startled, glancing at the former Priestess, and then down at the scribbles in the sandy soil. “But I don’t understand — Sasami-hime, are you saying that you had some kind of premonition, and that it made you write down characters that only Tokimi can read?”

“It’s a Kii prayer.” Sasami agreed unsteadily. “That’s what she said. A Kii prayer.”

“Tokimi-chan, are you all right? You look shaken up.” Suki slipped a gentle arm around the former Priestess’s shoulders. “Is what Sasami says correct — you know what these things say?”

“Yes.” Tokimi raised anxious, tearful eyes to her companion. “It is Kii. Tokimi… Tokimi can read it.”

“But *why*?” Seiryo looked non-plussed. “Princess, I know I’m ignorant of a lot of this magic business, but it seems a little bit random to me. Why are you suddenly plagued with Kii prayer text?”

“I don’t know.” Sasami admitted. “But it happened when Tokimi wrote her name in the sand. When I saw the Kii characters, it was like it stirred something inside of me. Tsunami, maybe. She and Washu have a connection these days, just like you have one with Tokimi, I guess. When we flew to Kihaku, I made Tsunami save Washu’s life. Tsunami is fond of Washu — maybe she’s in trouble somehow, and Tsunami wants me to know.”

“But why Kii?” Suki put a tentative finger to the words in the ground. “Tsunami is Juraian.”

“Tsunami’s people went to Kihaku, though, before you or I were born.” Sasami reminded her. “Her people were there, when Tokimi and Washu were just children. Even before. Maybe she knows more than I do… she’s never been entirely clear when giving me pictures.”

“Washu-neechan is in trouble?” Tokimi whispered. “With the… the blue fire? And the… Kii death spell?”

“Spell? I thought you said it was a prayer?” Seiryo glanced up sharply, and Tokimi spread her hands in a helpless gesture.

“I don’t know.” she said unevenly. “I don’t know the words… Maybe is a spell. Maybe is a prayer. Kii word is the same.”

“Don’t shout at Tokimi, Seiryo.” Suki scolded. “She’s upset, can’t you see that?”

“Yes, but I haven’t a clue why.” Seiryo frowned. “Washu isn’t exactly weak. And we don’t even know for sure that anything has happened to her.”

“No, but I think we should find out.” Sasami held out her hands to her advisor, and gently he helped her to her feet. “I feel a little steadier now. But… but I need to speak to Ayeka and Uncle. If Washu is in trouble… she’s done so much for us in the past few years. She’s risked her life for Jurai time and time again. If she is in trouble, I want to do something to help her. Tsunami’s force is stronger inside of me now, and…”

“And I doubt very much that your Lord Uncle or the Lady Ayeka will consider letting you out of their sight any time soon, considering the fact you almost died on Yousai, Hime.” Seiryo said frankly. “Perhaps it would help if you could be clearer on what you saw. I still feel like I’m missing pieces of the puzzle.”

“A huge fire.” Tokimi whispered, before Sasami could respond, and the princess turned her gaze on the former priestess, taking in the troubled look in the sapphire eyes. “Built of wood and blessed with the Eagle’s magic. Purifying fire, to expel demons. The World claims one as his own, and takes the soul down to the core, to live again with the World’s heart.”

“Tokimi-chan?” Suki murmured. “What Sasami is saying means more to you than it does to us, doesn’t it? Can you explain? Please? At least… can you try?”

“When… when someone is dead, Priest says the prayer to return the soul to the World.” Tokimi bit her lip, hovering her hand over Sasami’s clumsy characters, and then, with a brisk, sweeping gesture, she brushed them away. “The blessed fire takes their body, and their soul is taken to the World. It is… is ritual.”

“You mean like a funeral rite?” Seiryo suggested. Tokimi faltered, then nodded her head.

“Yes.” She agreed. “I think… like that. The Priests — they were buried in the heart of the World. They are the World’s servants, and must be preserved in case the World needs them again. But the others… the others… they are given to the World in fire. Blue fire. Blessed by the Eagle spell.”

“Alive or dead?” Seiryo demanded.

“Dead!” Tokimi looked horrified at the implication in the nobleman’s words. “Dead, Niichan! Not living people. Just dead.”

“Well, in my vision, Washu was definitely *not* dead.” Sasami said firmly. “If it even was Washu. I can’t be totally sure, but I’m fairly certain that it was. She was alive, Tokimi. She wasn’t dead.”

“I think we need to find out whether Washu is or isn’t safely on the Earth before we do anything else.” Seiryo said decidedly. “If she is in trouble, then no doubt there’s something the Emperor or Princess Ayeka can sanction to help her. In fact, if it comes to it, I’ll go myself… if you permit it, Sasami-sama. But we don’t know anything for sure yet. And there’s no sense in scooting across the universe based on a premonition, even if it did come from Tsunami.”

“Seiryo’s right.” Sasami frowned. “I don’t understand what it means, and Tsunami isn’t answering my questions. Perhaps she doesn’t even know herself.”

“Tsunami took a beating when you were on Yousai, and then you used a lot of strength to purify Ramia.” Seiryo said sensibly. “More likely she’s taking some time to recover.”

“Tsunami is a Goddess, Nii-chan. She’s not your average warrior.” Suki reminded him.

“Tokimi-chan, are you going to be all right?” Sasami asked anxiously. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. We were having such a nice time with the flowers, and then…”

“Not Sasami’s fault.” Tokimi shook her head, a smile touching her lips, but the sapphire eyes remained clouded.

“If you can walk, Hime, we’ll return to the house.” Seiryo suggested. “And I’ll see if the Unko can make contact with Ryo Ohki or with that strange robot girl Yume. It’s encountered both in some proximity before, so it should be possible. I can access the Unko’s radio remotely, and it seems the best course of action to take.”

Tokimi got to her feet, hesitating, then flinging her arms around Seiryo, taking him off guard.

“Nii-chan, help Oneesan?” She begged. “Please, Nii-chan… we must help Washu-neechan!”

“Tokimi, if Washu needs help, you can guarantee we won’t forsake her.” Seiryo said gravely, sending her a reassuring smile, and Tokimi leant her head up against him. “All right? I promise. Washu is my friend too, you know, and she’s done a lot of things to help me, as well. So if she is in trouble, you can rest assured that we won’t just let her struggle. But if we take this to the Emperor, Tokimi-chan, you may need to come too. After all, you understand this… this spell-prayer, and what it means. And we might need someone to explain.”

Tokimi sighed, but nodded her head.

“To help Oneechan.” She said reluctantly. “Tokimi will.”

“Then lets go back to the house.” Suki said decidedly. “I’ll make some tea and maybe Seiryo can find something out about what all of this means.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

"Well, are you picking up anything?"

As Ryo Ohki coursed through the bleak sectors of space, Tenchi cast his fiancee a quizzical look, drawing his jacket more tightly around him as he glanced out at the surrounding stars. "Ryoko, what has Ryo Ohki said about this? Do you know where we're going? Because you haven't said much since we took off."

"It's still early, and some of us haven't been to bed yet." Ryoko sighed, leaning against the control unit with a frown as she shook her head. "I wanted to leave as soon as possible, Tenchi, but I'm tired. And as for where we're headed, I've no idea. Nor does Ryo Ohki — not really. She's backtracking the course she took when she escaped from whatever captured Washu, but her senses were a little scattered at the time. She doesn't remember clearly where she was… either that or it's not in her navigation data at all. Which means… God knows what it means, to be honest. Washu could be anywhere."

"Ryoko." Tenchi frowned, coming to rest a gentle hand on her shoulders. "I'm sure Ryo Ohki can track her down. She's one of the best there is at this kind of thing, remember? She's no ordinary spaceship."

Ryo Ohki let out a mew at that, and Ryoko smiled faintly, nodding her head.

"I know." She agreed. "I just… I'm frustrated, Tenchi. That's all. The whole selling point of Washu taking Ryo Ohki away in the first place was to give you and me some privacy. Some time alone together, which we get very, very rarely. And not only has she put Ryo Ohki in danger, she's got herself into some kind of trouble. Which means you and I wind up running to the rescue, and that sort of defeats the point."

"Yes, I know." Tenchi frowned, gazing out at the darkness once more. They had left the Earth, he mused, just before the sun had risen, and now, as their journey crept into its third hour, he was beginning to regret not having taken a moment to grab breakfast for them both before they had taken off. Sending Ryoko a sidelong glance, he realised that there would be no stopping en route to take a break.

Ryoko's body was rigid with tension, and as he regarded her, Tenchi knew that it was more than simple irritation that had got his fiancee's nerves on edge.

"She and Washu have become close since Washu started living on the Earth." He mused. "She won't necessarily say it, but Ryoko's worried about Washu. And so am I, somewhat. But I just…"

"Tenchi?" Ryoko sent him a doubtful look, nudging him and bringing him back to the present with a jolt. "You were spacing out. What are you thinking?"

"Just that Washu isn't the kind of person to easily get herself into difficulties. That's all." Tenchi admitted. "And more, even if she did stumble into something, she's powerful enough to get out of it. Are you sure it's as bad as you think it is? Ryo Ohki was frightened, I know, and I'm sure that because you and she are so closely connected, she's been able to give you more of an idea what went on than she can me. But you did say that Ryo Ohki's fear could cross into your own thoughts and affect you. Are you sure that, well, you're not overreacting?"

Ryoko frowned, sinking down into the pilot's chair as she did so.

"Yes, I'm sure." She said at length. "Ryo Ohki's panic probably has penetrated my brainwaves, if I'm honest, but it's more than that. Now Ryo Ohki's calmed down somewhat, she's been able to show me more coherent pictures. Whatever has Washu took her completely off guard. They had her on her knees before she could even land a blow."

"But… what kind of magic could do that to someone like Washu?" Tenchi stared. "Even since Kihaku was destroyed, she's built up her strength and she's not an pushover."

"No, exactly." Ryoko said grimly. "Which is why I'm prepared to believe she genuinely is in trouble. And because of that, I'm willing to head out to look for her. Washu sent Ryo Ohki away partly for her own protection, but for another reason, too. She told Ryo Ohki to go home, to tell me what had happened… to get help."

"*Washu* asked for help?" Tenchi faltered, and Ryoko sighed.

"I know. She and I have that in common." She said heavily. "We're both solitary in some regards. If she could handle it, she would have done. And the chances are, we'd never even have heard about it. The fact she actively sent Ryo Ohki to find us makes me concerned. It didn't seem to be in character."

She rubbed her temples.

“And I’m starving hungry, but we haven’t time to stop.” She added. “Damn her. She really knows how to throw a spanner in the works in the most wholesale way.”

Tenchi moved to the side of the spacecraft, pressing his hands against the glass as he glanced at the spinning planets, each one encircled by one or more gleaming satellite moons.

“So where are we heading to, in rough terms?” He murmured. “I know you don’t know exactly, but you must have some clue. We’ve been flying in more or less the same direction since we left the Earth, so Ryo Ohki must remember something about it.”

“She does.” Ryoko confirmed. “We’ve followed the course in her data banks for the solar system where Kihaku used to be. But we’ve moved beyond that now, and according to what she thinks, what we’re looking for is somewhere in this sector or the next. But I don’t see anything, and she’s not picking up anything. It’s not that it’s an overly crowded section of space, either… I don’t understand why her radar system wouldn’t at least pick it up. But it isn’t happening. I don’t get it.”

“Ryoko.” Tenchi turned, gesturing towards Ryo Ohki’s control panel. “Should that be flashing? It doesn’t mean Ryo Ohki’s in trouble, does it?”

“No, it means someone’s trying to make contact with us.” Ryoko frowned, running her fingers absently over Ryo Ohki’s control sphere. “Of all the times — I bet it’s Yume. I bet she can’t do two things without asking someone’s opinion. Okay, Ryo Ohki. Beam her up. Let’s see what she has to say.”

Ryo Ohki mewed, her crystals hovering lower, and Ryoko frowned, her brows knitting together.

“The signal’s coming from where, did you say?” She asked incredulously. “This gets stranger and stranger.”

“Who is it, then? If it’s not Yume, who’s contacting us?” Tenchi looked startled. Ryoko bit her lip.

“A craft in the vicinity of Jurai.” She said softly. “Ryo Ohki says it’s the Unko, Tenchi. Though what that Tennan idiot wants with us is anyone’s guess.”

“Maybe you should find out.” Tenchi suggested, and Ryoko nodded her head.

“Yes, I suppose so. Maybe Yume did contact Jurai, after all.” She

reflected. “All right, Ryo Ohki. Make contact with the Tin Foil Terror and lets see what our noble friend has to say.”

Ryo Ohki yowled her acquiescence, and the ship’s communication screen hovered into view, becoming more and more substantial as the image of the Lord of Jurai materialised on the screen before them.

“All right, what is this about?” Ryoko demanded. “We are in the middle of something, here — why of all people are you trying to contact this ship?”

“So you are in space.” Seiryo looked thoughtful, and Tenchi came behind his fiancee as he assessed the gravity in the Juraian’s eyes. “I wondered about that, when I couldn’t put a signal through to the Earth. It seems that Washu’s communication device isn’t picking up the Unko’s frequency — so I thought perhaps I’d have better luck trying your ship, Ryoko-sama.”

“Washu’s communication device?” Ryoko blinked, then, “Hang on a minute. Rewind. Washu isn’t with us, you know. If you want to talk to her, I’m sorry, but she’s not available for comment right now.”

“I see.” Seiryo’s expression became more troubled. “So Princess Sasami may have had some justification in feeling uneasy.”

“Lord Tennan, why are you calling us?” Tenchi decided to take a hand now. “It’s not the best time. We think Washu might be in some kind of trouble. She and Ryo Ohki were ambushed on some planet somewhere, but…”

“That is why I am calling you.” Seiryo said soberly. “Princess Sasami had a premonition this morning and from what was discussed, she believed Washu might be in danger. She is, naturally, most anxious about the safety of her friend. And so, I admit, am I. I hoped to speak to you to confirm it was just too much sun and excitement, but it seems not.”

“Sasami knows something about this?” Ryoko’s eyes widened. “What, exactly, does she think she saw?”

“We don’t have a lot of information, so anything you can give us, we’ll take with pleasure.” Tenchi added. “That’s why Ryoko and I are flying — we’re trying to back-track Ryo Ohki’s course home, but so far we’re not having a lot of luck.”

“I’m afraid that Lady Sasami’s vision was not entirely clear, either.” Seiryo said sadly. “From what I understood, she saw a blue fire, engulfing a figure she thought was Washu. Then she was compelled to write something down, and the words she wrote were in Washu’s

native language, Kii. It was some kind of funeral prayer… which of course had Sasami-sama worried even more."

"How the hell do you know what it said?" Ryoko's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You don't speak Kii, and nor does Sasami."

"But Tokimi does." Seiryo said evenly. "And she too has been quite distressed by this whole affair."

"Tokimi." Tenchi pursed his lips. "It's funny, but it's easy to forget that she's there, sometimes. I mean, considering all she's been through, I guess I hadn't thought that she might remember things like reading and writing."

"Tokimi is impaired, Lord Tenchi. She is not stupid." There was censure in Seiryo's tones, and Tenchi gazed at him, surprised at the disapproval on the nobleman's face. "Either way, after having discussed it in more detail, both Princess Sasami and I are resolved that if something had indeed happened to Washu, it must have some bearing on this vision. And more, that it appears to have some connection to Kihaku, though what or how we are at a loss to decide."

"Kihaku is space dust." Ryoko said flatly. Seiryo nodded.

"As you say." He agreed levelly. "And yet, Tokimi was quite clear that the words Princess Sasami wrote down referred to a Kii ritual of some kind. There must be a connection somewhere."

Ryo Ohki let out a yowl at that moment, and Ryoko's eyes widened in surprise.

"Ryo Ohki?"

"What is she saying?" Tenchi asked, and Ryoko frowned.

"Lord Tennan, Ryo Ohki seems to agree with you." She said quietly. "She said that where Washu was — where they got into problems — it was somewhere wild and overgrown. And that there were carvings — Ryo Ohki didn't understand the carvings, but Washu did. She said… she said they were Kii. She was quite surprised by it, because she thought her planet was dead, too."

"It implies that Kihaku was somehow not destroyed." Seiryo rubbed his chin. "Even though we know that it was."

"Kihaku is not there. We passed the gap just a little while ago." Ryoko shook her head. "So it's not Kihaku we're looking for. Unless planets can have ghosts, in which case… I have no idea how we'll find her. But I don't think that that's it, though. Ryo Ohki was able to land and to leave without any problem. I think she'd have had issues

setting down on a spectral planet."

"Then the whole thing remains a bewildering mystery." Seiryo said frankly. "Princess Sasami is anxious to pursue this further, so I believe the matter of Washu's disappearance must go before the Emperor."

"It's not exactly Jurai's business, saving Washu's bacon if she gets herself captured." Ryoko objected. Seiryo shrugged.

"Sasami-hime is difficult to dissuade on the subject of her friends' lives." He said simply. "Thank you for confirming our suspicions, although I dearly wish you had been able to refute them. This is the Unko, over and out."

The screen flickered and then went black, and Ryoko sighed, rubbing her temples.

"Great." She muttered. "If Sasami's having visions, this might be a bigger deal than we think it is. And worse, if Jurai are involved…"

"It's not so bad if they are. You were going to call them for help yourself at one point, weren't you?" Tenchi pointed out. Ryoko nodded.

"I was, but only as a last resort." She admitted. "Listen, Tenchi. Sasami I can deal with, but it won't be Sasami, will it? After what happened on Yousai, that nutball father of hers isn't going to let her out of his sight. Which means her representatives will take it on. And that means we'll encounter that Tennan guy over again."

"Seiryo Tennan is not so bad as all that. Not really."

"I still don't like him." Ryoko said stubbornly. "Even if he is Sasami's best friend these days, I still think he's arrogant and full of himself. And it annoys me the way he likes to take over a situation. That's all."

"So maybe he is a bit conceited in his approach." Tenchi acknowledged. "And perhaps we didn't get the best of first meetings with him. But Sasami trusts him, which does say a lot for his character."

"Not really." Ryoko shook her head. "She's not the judge of character you'd like to think Tsunami is… remember, she befriended Yugi Kuroda, and she also palled up with Misao without realising the poor girl was hexed."

"But Washu is also friendly with Seiryo these days." Tenchi pointed out. "And she is a good judge of character, thanks to her Kii sight. I think it's a good thing if Jurai do get involved. The truth is, Ryoko,

we've found nothing from flying through this sector. If there is a planet here, we haven't found it — or Ryo Ohki's sensors are being confused and somehow she's been sent off course. If we had help, we might find her more quickly. What he said worried me — about blue fire and a Kii funeral prayer. The sooner we get to her the better."

"Yes, I know. It bothers me too." Ryoko admitted. "But the whole thing makes so little sense. I wish I could piece it together more coherently, but even Ryo Ohki isn't entirely sure of what she saw. And more, when the people spoke to Washu, it wasn't in a language Ryo Ohki could interpret. If it was Kii, then Washu probably understood better, and that must be why she sent my ship home for help. But then, how can it be Kii? Tokimi and Washu are the last Kii left, aren't they?"

"Maybe Kii isn't restricted to just Kihaku. Maybe it stemmed from a common source that originally populated both Kihaku and this other place we're looking for." Tenchi suggested. "With a universe as big as it is, well, is it impossible? We do know that people migrate."

"Yes, I know, but Tenchi, think about it." Ryoko shook her head impatiently. "One, Kihaku was technophobic. That's one main reason Washu left. Without space travel, there's no way the Kii could fly to other worlds. Two, Kihaku has been dead for generations. We're not just talking the past ten or fifteen years. We're talking much further back into the past — maybe even milennia. So the Kii people died out a long time ago, taking their language and culture with them. And three, the pictures Ryo Ohki's given me of what this place looked like — it was a savage paradise. Whoever these people are, who have Washu — they aren't technologically adapted, either. I don't know. It seems too strange for me."

"And if they don't have that kind of technology, why can't we find them?" Tenchi grimaced. "I suppose you're right. So what do we do? Do we keep looking?"

"We have to." Ryoko shrugged. "We'll arc around this sector once more. Then, if we've had no luck, we'll make a quick stop somewhere and grab breakfast of some sort. It might be that we can kill two birds with one stone and ask for information from people who travel through this sector a lot."

"That's a good idea." Relief flickered in Tenchi's brown eyes. "Let's do that, then. After all, someone must know where this place is, mustn't they?"

“Well, Seiryo?”

As Seiryo stepped away from his remote communicator, he turned, casting his sister a troubled look. Slowly he shook his head, running his fingers through his thick curly hair as he did so.

“Washu is missing, and it seems the Ryo Ohki has set off to look for her.” He said gravely. “Sasami-hime’s vision appears to be based in some fact, although it would help if she had seen a little more. Either way, though, now we know that the Professor is in trouble, I think that something must be done about it… one way or another.”

“You mean to go after her, don’t you?” Suki asked softly, and Seiryo nodded his head.

“If Sasami-sama and his Highness will let me, yes.” He agreed evenly. “Washu has done a lot of things for our family, Suki. You know that as well as I do. I don’t think I could feel right about ignoring this, not if she really is in danger.”

“I know.” Suki bit her lip, then she sighed. “All right. In truth, I agree with you. You must go, if anyone can, and see if you can help. I just… whenever you fly from Jurai, I worry about you. That’s all. You’re constantly putting yourself in dangerous situations, and I get frightened that you might not come back.”

“I’m not that easy to kill off, I promise.” Seiryo offered her a rueful smile. “Besides, I spent almost a decade putting myself in dangerous situations for the Galaxy Police. I’m well used to calculating the risks.”

“Yes, but when you were with the Police, I didn’t know about every dare-devil thing you were doing.” Suki said wistfully. “And since Father never spoke about you, and we never really had a chance to think on it, I didn’t know how dangerous your life there was. Now I know the things you do — and after you brought Lord Motonoya’s body back from Yousai, I worry that next time it might be you. That’s all.”

“Suki.” Seiryo looked reproachful, shaking his head. Gently he rested his hands on his sister’s shoulders, meeting her aqua eyes with earnest teal ones.

“Listen to me.” He said softly. “If not for Washu, and if not for her influence over the testimony of Yume the droid as well as her own evidence, I would probably have lost my land, my title and maybe even my life. Worse, you might have been arraigned for your involvement in Father’s death. Thanks to Washu, we’ve been able to rebuild ourselves as a respectable family of Jurai. I no longer suffer

from the headaches Tokimi's magic caused. Tokimi herself is well and healthy, alive even though she was so badly injured in the Kihaku explosion. We have a lot to be thankful for, and in the end, Washu played a big part in much of that. Would you have me repay her kindness by ignoring her when she may be in need? That's surely not the way a Tennan behaves?"

Suki flushed, looking ashamed.

"No, it isn't, and you're right. I'm sorry." She said sadly. "I'm being selfish and silly, and I should have more faith in you. If Washu needs help, then someone should help her. And I'm sure the Emperor will agree, when you explain it to him."

"Which I must go and do now." Seiryo pursed his lips. "Sasami-hime has already gone to address the matter with him and her lady sister… hopefully we can reach some settlement. I will return here before I do anything else, though. I will give you as much information as to where I am going as I can, so that you can worry as little as possible. All right?"

"All right." Suki hugged her brother tightly. "That will help. Thank you."

Seiryo flashed her an affectionate smile, then he disentangled himself from her embrace, heading down the main stairs towards the front entrance of the Tennan Estate.

"Nii-chan?"

As he reached the bottom, he was aware of a pair of sapphire eyes watching him and he faltered, turning to meet Tokimi's troubled gaze. She hurried forward, grabbing his hands in hers.

"Nii-chan, where are you going?"

"To see the Emperor." Seiryo said gently. "About going to help Washu."

"Washu-neechan *is* in trouble?" Tokimi's eyes widened in dismay. "Tsunami saw the truth?"

"I don't know what she saw, or whether it was true or not. But it seems your sister has fallen into some kind of difficulty." Seiryo agreed gravely. He paused, eying her thoughtfully for a moment, then, inwardly, he made up his mind. "Tokimi-chan, will you come with me to see Lord Azusa? I know you don't like whatever it was Sasami-hime wrote on the ground, but it might help Washu if you can come and explain things to him. What it means, and everything. I think I… no, I

know I might need your help. Will you come?”

Tokimi looked startled, then she nodded her head, slipping her arm through his with a look of determination on her face.

“Yes.” She said firmly. “Tokimi will come see King of Jurai. I will tell him about the Eagle’s Prayer.”

“Good girl.” Seiryo grinned. “It’s a good thing that you can speak Kii, you know — otherwise, we’d be totally lost. At least thanks to you we can make some kind of connection. Even if it is only a loose one.”

“Nii-chan, is Washu on Kihaku?” Tokimi asked, as they made their way across the Juraian landscape towards the magnificant structure of the Tenju tree palace. “Is that where she is now?”

“Kihaku is gone, Tokimi. You know that.”

“Yes, but…” Tokimi sighed, shaking her head. “Never mind. I’m sorry. I know there is no World any more.”

“We don’t know where she is, and that’s the truth.” Seiryo admitted. “But we intend to find her, if we can. That’s another reason I want you to come with me. I need to convince the Emperor to let me go look.”

“Will he say no?” Tokimi’s expression became one of alarm, and Seiryo shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s outside of my duties, and I have a lot of those.” He said vaguely. “But I’m sure we’ll talk him around. Don’t worry. You’re my secret weapon, if you like. I know people find it very hard to refuse you things, so I need you on my side.”

“I don’t understand.” Tokimi looked bewildered, and despite himself, Seiryo laughed.

“Don’t worry. You’ll see what I mean.” He promised, nodding acknowledgement to the guards that flanked the palace entrance as they saluted him, bowing their heads low before his companion. “Come on.. We’re going this way — just remember that when we see the Emperor, you must bow and not hug him like you do everyone else. Okay? He is the King, after all. He’s not quite like Sasami-hime.”

“All right.” Tokimi agreed. “I won’t hug the King of Jurai.”

“Right. Then this is the chamber we want.” Seiryo hesitated for a moment, then raised his hand to knock on the door of the principle Council Chamber. The door swung back, and as light glittered across the expansive, high-ceilinged room, Seiryo took his charge more

firmly by the arm, guiding her inside.

“Lord Tennan. We’ve been awaiting your report.”

A voice came from the furthermost dais, and raising his gaze, Seiryo saw the Emperor Azusa, his brother Haru on one side, and his niece Ayeka on the other. As the door shut behind them, Sasami ran down from the middle level, casting Seiryo an anxious look as she guided both the nobleman and his apprehensive companion up the flights of steps to where the Emperor awaited them.

“Well?” She demanded, as they made their bows to Jurai’s King. “Is Washu all right?”

“I don’t know.” Seiryo admitted. “She’s not on the Earth. I’ve spoken to Lord Tenchi and Lady Ryoko. The Ryo Ohki is in space, and it seems they’re trying to track her down. Washu appears to be missing… though her fate at this time seems unclear.”

“I see.” Azusa frowned. “And this is a troubling matter.”

“Washu isn’t feeble, though. Surely she can take care of herself?” Ayeka looked surprised. “After all, she’s proven more than once that she’s capable of getting people out of jams. Can’t she do the same this time — is this different?”

“Sasami-hime’s vision makes it concerning for me. As does the fact that her daughter and Prince Tenchi are so desperately looking for her.” Seiryo said gravely. “I agree with you, Lady Ayeka. But in this instance it seems that something has befallen her.”

“This is hardly Jurai’s problem, Lord Tennan.” Haru raised an eyebrow. “Washu-sensei is not a citizen of this planet.”

“No, but she was a citizen of a Juraian holding, my Lord Haru.” Seiryo said quietly, meeting the Chief of Security’s gaze with his own impassive malachite one. “She is a Kii, and Kihaku was Juraian territory. Which does, I think, make it a matter for Juraian jurisdiction.”

“Kihaku is long dead, and the planet no longer exists.” Haru snorted. “Professor Hakubi makes her home on the planet known as Earth. It may be that Jurai has extended friendship to this world, but the Earth is no colony of Jurai’s to be interfered in at will. This is not our business, Lord Tennan. We have many other matters to which we must attend first.”

“Father, that’s not fair.” Sasami protested, putting her hands on her hips. “Washu is our friend, you know that.”

“Sasami-chan, we can’t always go around dispatching forces to pull every heathen out of danger.” Haru said frankly.

“With respect, Lord Haru, Washu is no heathen.” Seiryo said gravely. “And my family is greatly indebted to her kindness. Indeed, so I believe, are yours.”

“Seiryo-sama is right.” Ayeka looked troubled. “Washu was the one who defeated Yugi. If she hadn’t done that, if she hadn’t…”

She faltered, a troubled expression on her face, and Sasami hurried forward, hugging her sister tightly.

“You don’t need to remember that.” She said comfortingly. “Because it’s all behind us now.”

Tokimi bit her lip, dropping to her knees before Azusa.

“Please, King of Jurai.” She begged. “My sister is in trouble. She needs help. Please… please let Nii-chan help her.”

“Nii… chan?” Derision sparkled in Haru’s dark red eyes, but before he could say more, Azusa raised his hand, effectively cutting him off.

“No, Haru, we won’t bait someone who has come here sincerely to seek our aid.” He said softly. “Washu-sama has done much for Jurai, it is true. She has proven her friendship to your daughters on many occasions. And she may not be a citizen of this world, or of an existing Jurai colony. But her sister, the Lady Tokimi, she is. Tokimi-sama has asked us for assistance. She is a ward of this planet… as such, I cannot refuse her plea.”

“Azusa?” Haru looked startled. “Are you seriously going to let Sasami charge madly into danger looking for this wretched scientist woman, when you know how close we recently came to losing everything?”

“No.” Azusa shook his head. “I don’t intend on letting Sasami do anything of the kind. As you say, she belongs here — and in the near future, this is where she will stay.”

“Then what?”

“Lord Azusa, with your permission and that of Lady Sasami, I will go and try to find the Lady Washu.” Seiryo said evenly. “Tokimi has already asked for my help in this matter, anyhow. And with your consent, I will act in both her name and Sasami-hime’s. As I said before, my family are also indebted to Professor Hakubi. I would like to be able to repay that debt, at least in some regard.”

“Please let Seiryo go, Uncle, if you won’t let me?” Sasami turned, fixing her Uncle a beseeching look. “I know I can’t go anywhere — not with so much still to do here — but I think Seiryo could find her. He was an Elite officer, and I’m sure he’d be able to pick up clues. Besides, Tsunami wants to help Washu, too. If she didn’t, I wouldn’t have had a premonition at all. Tsunami’s fond of Washu — and so am I. Please?”

Azusa eyed her keenly for a moment. Then he nodded his head.

“Very well.” He agreed quietly. “Lord Tennan, you have Imperial consent.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” Seiryo bowed his head. “And if I may, I have one other request to make of you?”

“Which is?”

“Permission to take Lady Tokimi with me, to hunt for her missing sister.”

“Take… Tokimi?” Even Sasami’s eyes widened at this. “But Seiryo…”

“Lord Tennan, are you sure that is quite wise?” Azusa looked doubtful, even as Tokimi glanced up at the sound of her name. “Tokimi may be fit in body and spirit, but in mind…?”

“Lady Sasami’s vision made her write down several characters which belong to a dead language. Kii.” Seiryo said quietly. “Tokimi is the only person other than Washu who is able to read this writing. I need her with me, else even with all my encryption experience, should I come across more of the same, I won’t be able to read it.”

“Tokimi?” Sasami eyed Tokimi doubtfully. “What do you think? Do you want to go with Seiryo to help Washu?”

“Help Washu?” Tokimi’s eyes opened wide, then she nodded. “I will help find Washu.”

“Well, on your own head be it.” Azusa frowned. “You have a better idea of her capabilities than I do, I’m sure. If you truly feel that she can be of some assistance to you, Lord Tennan…”

“I do.” Seiryo agreed. “Besides, if I were to leave her here, she would likely fret. And my mother… is never so well these days. She is often in need of Suki’s attention, and if Suki were to have to manage alone with both Mother and Tokimi…”

He shrugged.

“It seems prudent to take Tokimi along with me.” He added.

“Well, so be it.” Azusa spread his hands. “Go, with my blessing, Lord Tennan. I believe Jurai has a responsibility to help Professor Hakubi, in any case. So go and bring her back safely… and do so as swiftly as you can. After all, you have matters here to attend to also, and if resolution in this matter is not swift, I may be forced to recall you before you have succeeded.”

“I have taken that on board, my Emperor.” Seiryo agreed quietly. “Thank you.”

He turned, casting a glance at Tokimi, who stared back at him uncomprehendingly.

“Well, Tokimi-chan. You and I have a trip to prepare for.” He said evenly. “Come on. The sooner we get back to the Estate, the sooner the Unko can leave. And with any luck, the sooner we can find your sister.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

Well, so she had survived the night.

Washu opened her eyes cautiously, stifling a shiver as a cold wind whipped through the cracks in the stonework and then wincing as she jarred her stiff, cramped muscles. She struggled into a sitting position, rubbing her arms absently as she cast a glance across her cell to where she had discarded her cuffs the night before.

“Noone’s been here since then, because they’d have noticed that, I’m sure.” She murmured. “Interesting. They’ve got guards outside, no doubt — but they don’t like to spend time *with* the prisoners? Do they think that visitors from other worlds are demons? Although considering that Yuzuha woman — she’s a pretty good example of how they can be. Maybe they have a point after all.”

She sighed, getting slowly and awkwardly to her feet. At the very top of her restricted cell, light glistened through and as she gazed up at it, she realised that she must be beneath the surface of the planet, in some kind of lower basement. She pursed her lips, making doubly sure that she was not being observed, and then lifted herself up off the ground, hovering towards the chink of light. It was a small, barely adequate window, barred and grilled across the front, but there was enough of a ledge for her to rest her hands on, and as she settled herself there, struggling to see her location from behind the smoky, dusty glass, she heard the sound of voices.

Instinctively she stiffened, prepared to drop to the ground the moment she heard the wooden door at the end of the prison corridor creak open, but then she realised that the voices came from outside of the dungeon, not within it. Curiosity now piqued, she abandoned all attempts at discretion, pushing herself up against the window as closely as she could manage as she strained to pick up snippets of the conversation.

“Lady Yuzuha says she’s an outsider, and potentially dangerous.” She heard one man say. “She’s had men searching all night for her devil-ship, but they haven’t found it yet. The lady thinks its best we dispose of her before she threatens our whole planet. We’re to prepare the fire, as usual.”

“The fire?” Washu’s eyes narrowed. “What do they mean, fire? What kind of fire?”

“As the Lady wishes.” There was the sound of rustling clothing, and Washu deduced the second speaker had made some kind of fervent gesture against demonic possession. “A devil craft is bad enough, but if she had come here without such a thing…”

“Well, that won’t be a problem for us, once the outlander is put to death.” The first man said flatly. “We must gather fuel and herbs for the purification fire. That is the only way to make sure this stranger can’t hurt us.”

The two men moved out of earshot at this point, and realising she wasn’t going to overhear anything else, Washu lowered herself to the ground, uttering a sigh as she sank down against the wall.

“Oh, great.” She muttered. “So it sounds like they’re putting on a barbeque, and I’m first course. That’s not very nice… *or* very Kii.”

She frowned, rubbing her temples as she ran over the brief conversation in her mind once more.

“If they knew I could understand them, I’m sure they wouldn’t talk so casually near where I’m being held.” She decided. “But it’s nice to have had some advance warning, anyway. I suppose that I should think about escaping from this place, if they’re really keen on burning me to death. It’s so rude of them. This early in the morning — what a way to be woken up! And I’m hungry, too. They haven’t fed me anything yet. Maybe I should see whether or not they bring breakfast before the main event… although, given that they were talking about herbs, maybe I’d be better off finding my own food. After all, I don’t know anything about this planet, not really, or what is or isn’t poison. Yuzuha may say the people are Kii, but so far they’re not exactly living up to it.”

She glanced at her hands, rubbing absently at the dirt that still clung to her fingers.

“I’m such a mess.” She mused. “Maybe I could ask for a bath. Although they might not see the point, if they’re going to fritter me alive. No, I think the best move all round is to try and get out of here and then think about what to do next. I hope Ryo Ohki got to the Earth safely, and told Ryoko and Tenchi what’s happened. I know my daughter’s flighty, but I could use her help.”

She moved towards the black-steel bars of the cell door, faltering for a moment as a sudden realisation dawned on her.

“Fire.” She murmured. “Oh, now I see… is that what they intend to do? A fire of purification — that is what he said, isn’t it? Your brain is so slow, Washu, you should remember. Even if you did always try and find excuses to get out of helping Father cremate the town dead. I wish I could remember which tribes it was that committed their ashes to the Eagle through the fire that way. Not mine — that was all I needed to know. But it would be helpful, now. At least I’d have a bit more information to work with.”

She frowned, clenching her fists.

“Although someone should tell these people that if they want to adhere to Kii funeral rites, they should at least make sure the person in question is dead before they light the bonfire.” She added darkly. “I’ll bet anything you like that it was that Yuzuha who added this particular perversion to a fairly innocent — if creepy and macabre — ritual.”

She glanced over the cell door carefully, then flexed her fingers, nodding her head.

“Easy enough.” She decided. “Well, thanks for the hospitality, but no thanks. I’m going to take a walk around this planet and so long as I steer clear of people with that strange paralysing magic, I should be all right. I’m on my guard this time, at least. I know what to expect, so they won’t take me so easily a second time. I was fooled by the simple appearance of the planet, but now I know better.”

She took a purposeful step forward, pushing her hands and then her arms and full body through the bars of the cage door, stepping fully onto the cold slabs that flanked the walkway between her cell and the wall. Idly she traced her finger against the dusty stone, approaching the big wood-panel door that she had been dragged through when she had first been imprisoned. On the other side, she knew, guards were probably on duty.

“But I have to take my chances with them, and hope I don’t hurt them too much.” She decided. “Whether Ryo Ohki got to the Earth or not, I don’t know. But I’m not going to be someone’s charcoal producing experiment, and there’s plenty I don’t know about all of this yet.”

She set her teeth, raising her hands as light crackled across her palms. Narrowing her eyes, she focused her energy on the sturdy wooden door, sending out a strong barrage of orange light as the panels buckled and split, bursting open. There was the sound of exclamations and alarm from beyond, and as the smoke began to

clear, Washu found herself facing two or three Kii guardsmen, their uniform singed and their bladed weapons in their hands. Although they were recogniseable as swords, Washu was struck by the ancient design of the hilt, and her eyes widened as another memory stirred deep within her.

“Father had one like that, hanging over the hearth.” She whispered. “Carved like the tail feather of Kihaku’s eagle.”

“Where do you think you are going? Stop there, Prisoner of Yuzuha!” The tallest man stepped forward, brandishing his blade, and Washu forced herself back to the matter at hand, spreading her arms as a whiteish glow enveloped her body.

“I’m going for a little walk, if it’s all the same to you.” She said cheerfully, talking slowly and deliberately in Galactic Tongue. “Thanks for putting me up. You’ll have to send me the tab, though — I’m afraid I left my cash in my other spaceship.”

Before any of the men could react, she hazed herself out of view, re-materialising in the corridor behind them and hurrying along the hallway, taking the first and then the next turning as she sought to throw off the guards she knew would follow her.

“It would be easy to teleport myself back to the place Ryo Ohki and I landed, but I’m sure now that that wouldn’t be a good plan.” She murmured. “I have a feeling that that’s where they want this little bonfire. Judging by what happened, it wasn’t so much a village as a military encampment. I was foolish not to spot the difference — I’m feeling foolish a lot lately. Has it really been so long since I thought about Kii culture? Or was I just too stuck up to absorb the nuances and shades of grey before?”

The sound of a clanging bell jerked her back to the matter at hand and she frowned, glancing around her as she heard the sound of heavy footsteps thundering in her direction. With a little shrug of her shoulders she gazed upwards, then made up her mind, launching herself up through the timbers of the wood-based floor to the level above. Fortunately the room in which she found herself was empty, and she took a moment to catch her breath, taking in her surroundings anew.

It was, at a glance, a regulation military chamber, with simple fittings and in proper, neat order. A narrow pallet bed lay beneath a small slitted window, and a wood chest by the furthest wall soon revealed several hanging uniforms in the style of the ones worn by the other guards. An aged bronze basin leant up against the wall, a ragged

cloth tossed over the side as if ready for morning ablutions, and candles stood in sconces around the wall, providing light when the nights were early to fall.

"Not much." Washu murmured, moving across to the window as she gazed out across the uneven landscape. "But I suppose you don't need much, if you're a guard in a place like this. Still, it's a wretched place to call home. Not even a fire to warm it, in the winter. I can't imagine that it's easy to live like this."

She sat down on the end of the bed, catching sight of something that lay beneath it and she bent to scoop it up, smoothing it out as she realised it was a crumpled sheet of wood-based parchment. The quality and lie of the paper reminded her with a jolt of the material her father had scribed prayers and blessings onto, and she glanced at the text, half expecting to see blessed words jumping out at her.

Instead, however, the note was simple and brief.

"'*Tonight, by the old tree, when the moon is highest'*." She read slowly, tracing her fingers alongside the smudged Kii characters as she did so. "'*I'll be waiting for your news'*. Well, so this is interesting. Does this indicate something more is going on here than simple, mindless obedience to a demon?"

She frowned, examining the sheet of paper more closely, and her eyes widened in triumph as she spotted the sloping characters inked in the corner of the parchment, blurry and damaged by the dust of the floor, but still clearly visible.

"Suki." She murmured. "The Kii symbol for love. Well well. A secret assignation? Have I underestimated these guards and their free will — or over-estimated Yuzuha's spell over them?"

"Who are you and what are you doing here?"

A voice from the doorway startled her and she was on her feet in a second, loosing the letter and cursing her inattention as she did so. Her first instinct to flee, something about the expression of the man who stood before her made her hesitate and she frowned, eying him more closely. He was dressed in the same attire as the other guards, smart and impeccably tied at the waist with a gold-thread sash. But there was something different in his expression, and as Washu pursed her lips, she realised that his eyes lacked the dull, lustreless appearance of his colleagues. On the contrary, his gaze was bright and wary, eying her in suspicion as one hand hovered over his sword, the other reaching for the discarded sheet of paper. He glanced at it briefly, then pushed it into the folds of his sash.

“I asked you a question.” He said softly, in pure, if accented Kii. “Who are you, where did you come from, and why are you in my chamber?”

Washu hesitated, gauging her opponent carefully. Then, slowly, she raised her hands in a gesture of submission.

“Just a traveller, passing through.” She said quietly, speaking in her native tongue so as to assure his comprehension. At this, his eyes widened in disbelief, and his grip on his sword tightened.

“*You*… are the outsider? The one Yuzuha-sama has imprisoned in this place?” He whispered. Washu nodded.

“I suppose that’s me.” She agreed carefully. “Although as you can see, I’m not imprisoned any more.”

“But… but how is it you speak our language?” The man blinked. “You are from outside — noone from outside speaks our tongue.”

“Maybe I’m not from outside. At least, I’d like to reason that out, too.” Washu admitted. “You don’t seem like the other guards… for some reason, I don’t have the same feeling when I look at you.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” The man’s eyes narrowed. “Are you a test? Have you been sent to test my loyalty to Lady Yuzuha — is that why you speak my language?”

“Believe me, I have nothing to do with your honourable Priestess.” Washu said candidly. “And I’m quite happy for things to stay that way, too. She and I, we didn’t exactly become bosom friends on our initial acquaintance.”

The man faltered for a moment, as if assessing her appearance, and Washu glanced down at her soiled, grubby attire, a rueful expression touching her face as she registered how shabby she must look. She was still dressed in the casual clothes she had lately taken to wearing whilst on planet Earth, in order to better fit in with the local population, and she realised that to his eyes, she must seem a strange creature indeed.

At length he raised his hands in front of his face, making a sweeping gesture of protection.

“I don’t know what you are.” He said softly. “But you can’t stay here. Yuzuha-sama…”

“She wants to burn me alive.” Washu said evenly. “At least, I’m guessing that’s what all the talk of holy fire is about. I’m not really that keen on the idea, as I’m sure you can imagine. So your best bet

would be to turn around and pretend you didn't see me. I don't intend to hurt you — or anyone, if I can help it. But I'm not going back to that cell, and if you try to make me, I'll fight you all the way."

The man pursed his lips, then slipped his body fully into the chamber, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

"That wasn't my intention." He said quietly. "I had decided already to help free you, before Yuzuha-sama's orders could be carried out. Whether you are outsider or not, I don't believe in the sacrificing of innocent lives."

"You don't?" Washu eyed the man keenly, pleased to see that his words were backed by the sincerity in his eyes. The guard shook his head.

"No, but if you're found here, it won't just be you who's for the fires." He said grimly. "So we need to get out of here, and fast. I don't know how you escaped from the cells, but they'll be looking for you once they know you're gone."

Washu glanced down at her fingers.

"I think they already know." She reflected absently. "I may have… surprised them, when I left."

"Then that's even more reason to get you out of my quarters and somewhere more secure. At least until we can get you back to whatever craft brought you here." The man seemed to make up his mind, holding out his hand to his companion. "I think I can hear voices on the stairs — will you trust me, traveller? I give you my word that I don't mean you any harm."

"I don't need your word. Honesty shines from you like a beacon." Washu said softly, and the man started, drawing back his hand momentarily as he eyed her uncertainly. Washu frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." The man seemed to get a grip on himself. "Just you… sounded like someone else, when you said that. That's all. Someone I know who… who sees into people's hearts somehow."

"Someone with Kii sight, perhaps?" Washu's heart skipped a beat, and the man's eyes widened. He nodded.

"Yes." He agreed, bewildered. "But how did you…?"

"Never mind. We don't have time, you said so yourself." Washu shook her head, gripping him tightly by the hand. "Take me wherever

it is you think I'll be safe. There'll be time to talk later, if we don't get caught."

"Right." The look of determination returned to the guardsman's eyes and he nodded, kicking the basin aside as he pressed his boot against a section of the wall. Before Washu's startled eyes, the stones slid back, revealing a passageway, and he met her disbelieving gaze with a rueful smile.

"Now you know why I prefer this chamber over any better in the complex." He said, by way of explanation. "Come on. The door will close behind us, and they will not be able to find it."

"All right." Washu gathered herself. "By the way, guardsman, what am I to call you? My name is Washu — what is yours? We can't keep referring to one another as guard and traveller."

"Tadashi." The man sent her a fleeting smile. "My name is Tadashi. Now follow me. It's a long and winding passage, but I know where it leads and we'll be quite safe once we reach our destination."

"I'm right behind you." Washu gritted her teeth, as she too began to hear the pounding of feet on the stone outside. "Let's go."

"I can't believe you even suggested such a thing to the Emperor! Seiryo, what were you thinking of! What do you want to do to the poor girl — do you realise how little Tokimi knows about the world outside of Jurai?"

"Tokimi is the only one who speaks Kii, other than Washu. What did you expect me to do?"

"But even simply boarding a spaceship like the Unko is bound to terrify her — did you even think about that, when you volunteered her for this mission of yours?"

Tokimi sighed, closing her bedroom door with a soft click as she leant up against it, closing her eyes. Ever since she and Seiryo had returned from their audience with Azusa, he and Suki had been arguing the matter out in the hallways below, and the sound of their raised voices had troubled her. She had withdrawn to the security of her chamber as soon as she had been able, but the sound still penetrated through her senses, and try as she might she could not shut it out.

"Suki is angry." She murmured, sinking down onto the end of her bed as she considered the matter carefully. "Angry with Nii-chan… but why? Because of… because of Tokimi? Has Tokimi done

something wrong, then? I… I don't remember doing anything bad. I was polite to the King of Jurai and I was not rude. I remembered to bow… Tokimi did not do anything wrong… did she?"

She sighed, burying her head in her hands. It was all so confusing, and over all of this, the fleeting uncertainty about her sister's safety kept on tweaking at the back of her thoughts.

"Washu-neechan is in trouble. She is not on her Earth planet, so she is in danger now?" She mused slowly. "Sasami… the Kii prayer… for Washu?"

She bit her lip, fluttering her fingers instinctively in a gesture of fervent protection, and then she sighed, dropping back onto her pillows.

"Washu-neechan." She whispered. "You've gone again. Gone away. Gone from Tokimi and I can't find you. Why can't I find you? And Suki… Suki is angry because Nii-chan… Suki is shouting at Nii-chan. I don't like it. I don't like it! They should stop… they should stop this, now!"

Tears pricked at the back of her eyes and she grabbed at her pillow, hugging it to her tightly for comfort as she closed her eyes against her ruffled emotions.

"I don't like fighting." She whispered. "I… I want to help Washu-neechan, but I… I don't want people to shout. I hate it. I hate it! Stop it… please, Nii-chan. Please, Suki… stop shouting. I don't want you to be cross because of Tokimi."

As she lay there, eyes screwed shut against the still-quarrelling siblings that paced the floors beneath her, other images came unbidden to her mind. Memories of another argument, so many generations before began to swirl through her senses, seeming as real and fresh as if it had occurred only days earlier, and she bit her lip as the sensation overwhelmed her. She was back on Kihaku, plunged deep into her recollections in an instant, as she recalled another fight between siblings. One that filled her with cold dread, even though she did not understand why.

"Washu?"

Tokimi shivered, pulling her shawl more tightly around her shoulders as she stepped cautiously between cracked seams of glittering rock. Above her, the sky thundered and raged with the start of a storm, and she gritted her teeth, renewing her resolve as she hurried deeper and deeper into the ground, following the abandoned mining pathways left there by the settlers.

As she reached a particularly narrow bend, she brushed her hand against the glowing surface of the rock and she gasped as a sudden rush of pain and anguish rushed through her. Stumbling, she clutched her hands to her chest, trying to draw air in to quell the panic that threatened to take over her entire body. All around her, the rocks themselves seemed to be crying, and Tokimi realised that the sensation was the wounded call of the World, whose core had been split apart by the greed of the Settlers.

"But Washu will come. Washu will help." She murmured to herself, forcing the rising hysteria back as she pushed onwards towards the deepest, darkest section of the old mining territory. "I never told Father where she was — I kept my promise to her. But now the World needs her. It's in pain, and Father… Father…"

She trailed off, tears touching her lashes as she remembered the events of the previous day. It had been a fierce fought battle, where the suspicions of settler and native had bubbled over into outright conflict, and in the heat of the fight, the Priest had been struck down.

Tokimi had never encountered death so directly before, although she had always known that her tribe had died of famine and war when she had been just a small child. To see someone she loved so stricken had pierced right through to the core of her being, and for the first time since the ships had loomed over the Kii horizon, she had felt a true and bitter hatred for the Settlers.

This thought chilled her to the bone and she shook her head as if to clear it. Resentment and hate were not her way, she reminded herself. And with Washu's help, surely peace could be reached? With a new Priestess — one who understood the ways of the Settler — perhaps the pain of the World could at last be placated. At least, Tokimi dearly hoped so. She had ultimate faith in her lost sister, hidden deep within the heart of Kihaku's world.

At length she reached a steel doorway, new and strange looking in the sea of blue-black rock and she hesitated, then pounded on the hard metal, calling her sister's name over and over again. At length the door slid back, as if conjured by magic, and Tokimi jerked her hands away, somewhat alarmed by the nature of her Washu's odd technology.

"Washu?" She murmured, stepping cautiously forward and taking in for the first time the secret home that her sister had constructed for herself beneath the surface of their world. Surrounded by unfamiliar creations, with texts in foreign script scattered around, Tokimi felt distinctly out of place. For the first time, she wondered if she had truly understood her sister, after all.

“Tokimi?” The voice from the shadows startled her back to herself, and Tokimi turned, a relieved smile touching her lips as she recognised the speaker. Washu’s hair was pulled back out of her face in a rough, casual ponytail, and her clothing was soiled with the singe-marks of failed experiments and long hours surrounded by the rock, but she was still Washu, and Tokimi hurried forward, flinging her arms around her companion.

“Washu-neechan!” She exclaimed. “Oh Washu, I’m so glad to see you. I’m so glad…”

“You’ve been crying, imoto-chan.” Washu held her companion at arm’s length, consternation in her eyes. “What’s wrong? Has something happened? Does Father know where I am?”

“Father… Father doesn’t know anything any more.” Tokimi choked out, unable to keep the emotion from her voice now. “Didn’t you sense it? As I came down here, I felt the World’s grief as much as my own. The entire planet cries out for him, Washu… don’t you know that Father is dead?”

“Dead?” Washu stared, disbelief flooding her green eyes, then, “I see. No. I didn’t know. Down here, it’s possible for anything to happen and for me to not know about it, Tokimi. It’s sort of the nature of my lab, if you like.”

“But the walls… you’re so close to Kihaku’s heart.” Tokimi protested. “Did you not sense its pain?”

“I didn’t.” Washu shook her head. “But then, I never was a very good Hakubi, now was I? It doesn’t surprise me that you should feel it, sister. You always did have enough compassion for the two of us.”

“Don’t you… don’t you care that Father is gone?” Tokimi stared at her companion in consternation, and Washu sighed, rubbing her temples.

“Yes, I care.” She said at length. “I’m sad that his life has ended. Especially for this planet… Kihaku had a lot of faith in him, after all.”

“And as your father?” Tokimi murmured. “Do you not feel that, as well?”

“I don’t know.” Washu admitted. “Truthfully, Tokimi, we were never as close as you and he have always been.”

“He was killed by the Settlers.” Tokimi sighed, sinking down onto a vacant unit as she regarded her sister hesitantly. “There was a great battle, and they came at Father and his men with weapons like nothing I have ever seen. Machines from hell, nothing less. I have never been so afraid, Washu. You said that the Settlers came here and that we could learn from them.

But last night… last night…"

"Were many people killed, Tokimi-chan?" Washu asked softly. Tokimi shook her head.

"No." She responded. "Because Father did not allow it. He shielded his people so they could escape… but in the end, the Settler's weaponry was too much for him. He could not hold his shield… their Tsunami power took his life."

"Tokimi, have you ever even seen this Goddess of theirs?" Washu asked impatiently. Tokimi looked startled, shaking her head.

"No, only in pictures." She responded. "Why? What does that matter?"

"Just that for someone who has complete faith in Kihaku's Eagle, you seem certain that a foreign deity — for whose actual existance you have no proof — was strong enough to kill the Priest of this World." Washu said frankly. "Isn't the Priest the Eagle's chosen one?"

"Washu, don't." Tokimi begged. "Now isn't the time for one of your debates, and I didn't come here for that reason. I came… I came because…"

She trailed off, and Washu sighed.

"You came because Kihaku is missing its leader." She said quietly. "And by blood, I am the Hakubi heiress. Isn't that right?"

Tokimi nodded her head mutely, and for a moment Washu did not respond, crossing the floor of her lab and gazing up at the ornate characters that decorated the far wall. Then, she turned back to face her companion.

"I am not Priestess of Kihaku." She said gently. "You know that and so did Father. I doubt he would have handed the crown of the Eagle to me, Tokimi. Not considering how little attention I paid to his instructions and will."

"But Washu!" Horror flooded Tokimi's expression and she got to her feet, gripping her sister around the wrists in her desperation. "Washu, there is noone else! You ***are*** *the heiress! You are Father's blood daughter! Think of your name — why did Father name you what he did, if he didn't intend you to wear the crown of Kihaku, one day?"*

"It doesn't matter." Washu carefully disentangled her sister's fingers. "Listen, Tokimi. I love you more than anything… that's the truth. And I don't like to let you down. But if I was to become Priestess, this world would soon capitulate and far quicker than it has under Father. I have no interest in the Eagle. I don't even fully believe in all the things that you and

the others take for granted. Maybe I am a Hakubi, but I'm not interested in serving this world as a would be goddess in a gilded cage."

"Washu, you must! You have to!" Tokimi exclaimed. "Who else can be Priestess, if not you? You haven't felt the World's pain! You haven't sensed what it's going through! The World needs you! It ***needs*** *you!"*

"If I can't sense the World's pain here, surrounded, as you say, by Kihaku's core, then I will never feel it, Tokimi." Washu shook her head. "I'm a scientist — that's what my time underground has taught me. That there are so many things in the universe beyond the practices of this planet, and I want to see and experience every one of them for myself. I want to know why things happen, and how they work. I want to learn about other places and understand how they live their lives. Kihaku is not my destiny. I decided that when I left home. And I'm sorry, imoto-chan. I don't like to upset you. But this isn't the life I choose. And noone — not even you — will compel me to become a slave to this planet's whims the way Father always was."

Tokimi stared at her sister, seeing her as if for the first time. The other girl's bright green eyes, the legacy of her Hakubi father glittered with obstinacy and resolution, and her normally cheeky expression had given way to a sober, almost grim look as she made up her mind what she must do. Tokimi drew breath into her lungs, her heart aching with grief and anger, and as she stood there, gazing at the one in whom she had always had faith, the pain and anguish of the World's call washed through her thoughts once again. With a flash of sudden rage, she brought her hand out across Washu's cheek, causing her sister to stumble back against her equipment.

"Father was right." She said darkly, her heart pounding in her ears as she let the strange lure of the World's aura tease at her senses. "You are not the Heiress to Kihaku. You are just a selfish girl who cares nothing for your people. You have not grown up, Washu. You are still a child who plays with her toys and avoids the ones who need her."

"Tokimi?" Washu put a ginger finger to her cheek, gazing at her companion in surprise. "I know you loved Father, but…"

"It's not about Father!" Tokimi exclaimed, banging her hand down on the computer unit as the strange, resentful anger intoxicated her senses. "It's about Kihaku! It's about your own kind, Washu! What kind of a person are you, when people are suffering and you won't come to their aid!"

"It isn't that simple…"

"Maybe it ***is*** *that simple." Tokimi shook her head. "I have always*

considered you sister, but Father was right. He said, when you left, that I should think of you as dead. That I should forget about you, because none of us could put faith in someone so inconstant and deceitful. But I believed that you'd do the right thing, if the time came. Well, I trusted you too much. I was wrong. I won't be wrong again. You can stay in your little prison, oneesama. I won't be coming back again."

With that she turned on her heel, hurrying out of the lab and back up the carved stepways towards the uncertain darkness of the surface world. Behind her, she heard Washu call her name, but she paid it no heed, anger still coursing through her as she sought to break through to the woodland above. Once she had escaped the seam, however, grief and despair took the place of rage in her heart and she sank to her knees, tears coursing down her cheeks as she relived the argument over again.

"We have never fought so. Never." She whispered. "Washu, the sister I love so much… Father, she has betrayed us all. She has betrayed Kihaku, and now… and now there is no Priest or Priestess. Kihaku will rage out of control, without someone to wear the Eagle's coronet. What shall we do? What ***can*** *we do?"*

"Lady Tokimi?"

The voice of her father's scribe alerted her to the fact she had company and she raised her gaze to him, hopelessness in her sapphire eyes.

"Lady Tokimi, are you well?" The man sounded anxious, at her side in a moment, and Tokimi nodded her head, dashing away her tears.

"Did you find the Lady Washu, like you said you could?"

"Washu is dead." Tokimi said softly. "She is dead to this world, Ojisama, and she won't be coming back here. She will not be Kihaku's Priestess. Father spoke true."

"So his daughter really did perish." The scribe sighed. "She really was consumed by wolves that night? And I hoped he had been mistaken."

"No, not by wolves." Tokimi shook her head, allowing him to help her to her feet. "By something worse, Ojisama. By heresy. She was seduced by the dark magic that pervades the Settler's technology. She has betrayed her world, and she is dead."

"Then Kihaku has no Priestess."

Tokimi hesitated for a moment, then resolution flickered across her senses.

"Kihaku has a Priestess." She said quietly. "It has me."

“Lady Tokimi?” The scribe looked startled. “But surely…”

“Father taught me in all the rituals, everything.” Tokimi said simply. “And he taught me far better than he ever taught Washu. I may have been born an Inoue, but I was raised by a Hakubi and I am ready to honour Father’s memory in the only way I can. Washu may not be Priestess of Kihaku, but I can be. And I ***will*** *be, Ojisama.* ***I*** *will answer the call of this World.* ***I*** *will wear the Eagle’s crown. In the absence of others, that duty falls to me.”*

“Tokimi is… Priestess?” Tokimi’s eyes snapped open in horror and alarm, and she pulled herself into a sitting position, shaking with fear as she tried to make sense of what she had remembered. “But that… Tokimi can’t… Washu is… Father is dead! Father is killed by… by Jurai? And Washu… Washu and Tokimi… stop it! Stop being in my head! I don’t like it. I don’t like it!”

“Tokimi?”

Suki’s voice from the doorway penetrated her panicked state and she raised her head, tears flowing down her cheeks as she scrambled to her feet, hurrying to fling herself on her adoptive sister. Suki let out an exclamation, hugging the distressed girl tightly, and something in the gentle way her companion stroked her hair soothed Tokimi’s wrenched spirits.

“You see, Seiryo?” She heard the girl say. “She’s not up to this. You’ve been rash — and now look.”

“Tokimi, are you all right?” That was Seiryo’s voice, and Tokimi could hear the worry in his tones as he approached them. She turned to meet his gaze, offering him a feeble smile.

“Nii-chan… and Suki… are friends?” She whispered. “I don’t like it. I don’t like… like fighting.”

“She heard us.” Suki sounded stricken at this, glancing down at her charge. “Tokimi, could you hear what we were saying, all the way up here?”

Tokimi nodded dolefully, and despite herself, Suki bit her lip.

“I’m sorry.” She murmured. “I don’t think either of us realised how loud we got.”

“Suki and I are always friends, Tokimi.” Seiryo added, leaning up against the bedroom wall. “Brothers and sisters are always friends, you know. We fight sometimes, but it doesn’t mean we don’t like one another. It just means we don’t always agree. That’s all.”

“Don’t always… agree.” Tokimi mused over this point for a while, then she sighed. ‘Washu and Tokimi don’t always agree.’ She said unsteadily. “I remember…”

“Tokimi, if you don’t want to leave Jurai, I’ll understand.” Seiryo grasped her hands gently, meeting her gaze with a serious one of his own, and for a moment, Tokimi was dimly aware that he had stopped her from telling him what she had remembered. “I shouldn’t have volunteered you to come, not without thinking it over. If you want to stay here with Suki, it’s okay. I’ll go find Washu. You don’t have to be involved.”

“No… Tokimi has to help Washu. Washu can’t be gone away from Tokimi again.” Tokimi said sadly, fixing him with a melancholic look. “Washu went away before. Went away and left Tokimi all alone. Tokimi… must find Washu. So… so I will help Nii-chan. I… I have to.”

“Are you sure about that, Toki-chan?” Suki sounded doubtful, but Tokimi nodded.

“I must.” She repeated. “Tokimi loves Washu-neechan. Tokimi must help.”

“Then I guess we’re leaving first thing in the morning.” Seiryo set a gentle hand on her shoulder, and despite her upset, Tokimi glowed as she saw the approval in his malachite eyes. “I knew you were tougher than that, Tokimi — good girl. I didn’t think a sister of Washu’s would do anything less than come along.”

“All right.” Suki sounded reluctant, but she nodded her head. “If it’s that way, I can see I have to back down. Tokimi, I’ll help you pack some things to take with you, all right? And you make sure you do what Seiryo tells you… we don’t want anything happening to you, you know.”

“Tokimi will be all right.” Tokimi disentangled herself from her companion’s embrace, moving to the window of her chamber. “Washu is up there, somewhere. In space. Where Kihaku was. Isn’t she?”

“Yes, we think so.” Seiryo agreed softly. “And we’ll find her, Tokimi. Don’t you worry.”

“Yes.” Tokimi sighed, then nodded her head. “We will.”

“You should get some rest. I’ll worry about what you need to pack, don’t worry.” Suki said decidedly. “You look all in, and it will be a long trip, I imagine.”

“All right.” Tokimi nodded absently. “Tokimi will rest. Then Tokimi will help Nii-chan find Washu. And everything will be right again.”

“That’s the plan.” Seiryo agreed easily. “Come on, Suki. Let’s leave the girl to herself.”

Suki frowned, but made no demur, allowing her brother to lead her out of the bedroom. He closed the door behind him, but as they walked away, Tokimi could still hear their voices.

“I didn’t realise she heard us yelling. I should have known that would upset her as much as anything else.” Suki sounded penitent, and Tokimi bit her lip, wondering if she really had done something wrong to make her adoptive sister sound so sad.

“I’m more concerned with something else she said.” That was Seiryo, and somehow his words chilled Tokimi more than his sister’s had. “About remembering. For now, Suki, let’s just let her choose what she does. If she’s worried about Washu, she must come help find her. And I’ll make sure she sticks to me like glue, don’t you worry. But the last thing we want is for her to start putting the pieces of the past back together. It would hurt her. We can’t let that happen.”

“No, you’re right.” Suki sounded wistful. “I don’t like it, Seiryo, but I’ll go along with it. After all, as you say, we can’t fight her when she wants to help her sister. It’s just… I really worry what might happen to Tokimi after all of this. That’s all.”

“Me too.” Seiryo sighed. “But even so, I believe in her. Now come on, we have plenty to do if I’m going to leave at first light. I want to make sure there’s a chamber aboard the Unko that’s habitable for her, at the very least.”

At this point their voices faded out of earshot, and Tokimi bit her lip, trying to make sense of the muddled phrases.

“What should Tokimi not remember?” She murmured. “What did Nii-chan mean? Has Tokimi done something terrible? Something that would make Nii-chan and Suki never speak to her ever, ever again? Was that why Washu-neechan left Tokimi? Did Tokimi do something… unforgiveable?”

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

“Ryoko, when you said we were going to take a break, I didn’t think you meant this kind of break.”

Tenchi gazed up at the glowing neon signs that surrounded them, a doubtful look on his face as he observed the flickering letters and sparking wiring that occasionally sent bright shards of light into the black atmosphere. All around them, crafts of all shapes and sizes — most showing battle scars of some kind or another — were hauled in close to the walkways, while roughly dressed men and well-armoured women jostled to get through the doors before one another.

Ryoko snorted, nudging him on the arm.

“You’re not going to wimp out on me, are you?” She asked speculatively. “Tenchi, you’ve been here before. And it’s not like Haki will be waiting in the shadows this time. You’re in no danger, trust me — the last time I came here I put straight anyone who thought they were going to mess with the Space Pirate Ryoko.”

“Yes, but…” Tenchi sighed, shaking his head. “All right. I suppose so. Just… it doesn’t seem like a good time to come drinking. I thought you were worried about Washu, that’s all. And it’s barely past midday, Earth time.”

“We’re not in an Earth time zone now, and I wasn’t thinking of coming here for that reason.” Ryoko shook her head impatiently, grabbing him by the arm and phasing them both through the pushing crowds of people into the main saloon of the bar itself. “Jiro is the kind of man who picks up information, and his clientele travel all over the known universe. Some of them even stray into unchartered territory from time to time. We’re having no luck tracking down Washu or this planet that Ryo Ohki remembers them being on. Maybe he’s heard something that can be of help to us. You never know.”

She frowned, reaching up absently to pat the tired cabbit who was curled up against her neck.

“And Ryo Ohki’s exhausted.” She added. “She did just fly all the way out here and back. She needs a rest too, you know. This seems as good a place as any to stop, being that we’re in the vicinity.”

“I see.” Tenchi nodded his head. “So you want to question Jiro, then? That does make sense.”

“Thank you.” Ryoko said acerbically. “I might be a pretty face, Tenchi-kun, but there’s more to me than that. Give me some credit for knowing the universe, will you — and pipe down?”

“All right, all right. I’ll follow your lead.” Tenchi held up his hands in mock surrender. “I just don’t feel very safe in this place. That’s all. It’s full of people who might kill you as soon as look at you — and that isn’t really the kind of place I like to spend my free time.”

“Noone will kill you.” Ryoko dismissed this with a flick of her fingers. “Firstly, you’re with me, and there are still a lot of people who are scared of me. Second, you have Tsunami’s magic — or had you forgotten that little factor? And third, Jiro wouldn’t stand for it. He doesn’t much like killing in his bar — bad for business, you know. Haki might break those rules, but for most people — fighting is as far as it gets. We’re fine. So stop worrying. All right?”

“You’re really not doing much to comfort me, but all right.” Tenchi muttered, trailing her up to the bar as his enigmatic fiancée dropped down onto an empty stool. She gestured for him to follow suit and he did so, even as she raised her hand, uttering a shrill call to alert the bartender’s attention.

“Ryoko!” Jiro’s eyes became wide with surprise and pleasure. “And I didn’t think we’d get another visit from you so close to the last one. I thought you were avoiding this sector of space unless you had to come here.”

“Well, it’s not a case of avoidance.” Ryoko shook her head. “But I’m sure it doesn’t do you any favours, if I’m constantly dropping by. Now that I’m no longer a pirate, and all that.”

“For you I always make an exception.” Jiro said firmly, his hand hovering over the glasses as he eyed her questioningly. “I’m sure that you know it’s all over the universe that Haki was destroyed by Jurai’s Goddess. Since you have some connections with Jurai these days — can we put that act of blood-vengeance at your door?”

“I don’t think Tsunami was thinking of me when she did it.” Ryoko said honestly, gesturing to indicate that they weren’t there to drink. “But I do know that there’s been no sign of any debris or anything from Karasu since. We don’t know if they will regenerate again, not for certain. But it doesn’t seem like there’s anything left of either of them to do it.”

“That’s good news, and for more than just myself.” Jiro said frankly. “And the little girl? I trust you managed to get her home safely?”

“Little girl?” Tenchi looked startled, then, “Misao, you mean?”

“Misao is fine. She’s back where she belongs and all of Yousai are pretty happy about it.” Ryoko confirmed. “Though next time you have a lost waif and stray, Jiro, remind me to say no when you ask me to play babysitter. She was definitely more trouble than she was worth.”

“Your friend has been here before.” Jiro cast Tenchi a slight smile. “But it’s been some time, and I don’t remember a name.”

“This is Tenchi Masaki Jurai.” Ryoko’s eyes twinkled with mischief as she innocently added the royal appendage to her fiance’s name. “And I’m afraid we’re not here to drink or socialise, nice as that would be. A friend of ours has disappeared, and I was hoping you might know something that would help.”

“Masaki… Jurai?” Jiro paled slightly, staring at the Prince as if with new eyes, and Tenchi hastened to reassure him.

“Really, it’s not what you think.” He said hurriedly, casting his fiancée a dark look as he did so. “Ryoko likes to tease, that’s all. I am a descendant of Jurai, just like she is. But I don’t live there and I never have. This isn’t an official Juraian investigation, and I’m not here to cause you any trouble. We’ve come from the Earth, Jiro-san. And if you can help us, we’d be grateful.”

“Do you think pirates took your friend, then?” Jiro looked doubtful. “If so, I’m no help to you. I’ve heard nothing — and pirates do like to brag when they’ve pulled off a coup.”

“We don’t honestly know, but I don’t think so.” Ryoko sighed, resting her chin in her hands. “She was visiting Airai, and she disappeared on her way back. Ryo Ohki was flying with her, and they landed on some planet… but Ryo Ohki can’t find it again. It’s like it vanished. Whoever lives there seems to have been instrumental in Washu’s disappearance — but so far we haven’t managed to retrace my ship’s steps completely.”

“Foxed Ryo Ohki?” Jiro looked startled, glancing at the cabbit, who flicked her ears mournfully in agreement. “That’s unusual.”

“Yes. It is.” Ryoko grimaced. “But she has no recollection in her memory-bank of what this planet looked like from space. In fact, it’s as if she didn’t see the place until she set down through the atmosphere. Washu guided her down — but Ryo Ohki isn’t sure of

what she saw at all. If anything.”

“A planet that doesn’t exist, but does?” Jiro raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like your ship’s been indulging in the sake.”

“It sounds crazy, but it’s true, Jiro-san.” Tenchi said earnestly, as Ryo Ohki let out a little hiss of indignation at the barman’s implication. “We wondered if you knew anything about a planet like that — or if anyone had ever mentioned it to you in passing.”

“A ghost planet, huh?” Jiro rubbed his chin. “Off the top of my head, I’m not sure. I mean, there are always stories — superstitions, all that. But I imagine you want something more concrete.”

“At the moment, we’ll take whatever you have.” Ryoko said frankly. “Because right now, we’re completely stuck for options.”

“The friend in question is more than a friend.” Tenchi added quietly. “She’s Ryoko’s mother, and we think she’s in some danger.”

“Ryoko’s mother?” Shock flitted across Jiro’s expression, and Ryoko gave Tenchi a hefty nudge.

“We just want to know what you know.” She said briskly. “Never mind who she is or isn’t. Just anything you can tell us — that will be fine.”

“I didn’t realise Ryoko *had* a mother.” Jiro looked non-plussed, and Ryoko sighed, sending Tenchi a long-suffering glance.

“Pirates don’t have family, Tenchi.” She said quietly, and Tenchi looked sheepish at the reproach in her tones. “Remember that for next time, all right? If you have family, you have a weakness. And an enemy can exploit that weakness. In a place like this — learn to guard your tongue, okay?”

“You needn’t worry. There are some clients whose secrets aren’t for sale… not at any price.” Jiro assured her. “But I had no idea the issue was that delicate. In which case, I will tell you the stories that I’ve heard. Nothing conclusive, mind. It could all be the talk of drunken, drugged pirate raiders who are rather given to superstition on the whole, anyway.”

“Not all pirate superstitions are as nonsensical as they first seem to be.” Ryoko said with a shrug. “So let’s hear it. There might be something in it.”

“There has been some talk about a planet which can only be seen on certain nights.” Jiro said thoughtfully. “At least, I’m not sure that anyone really noticed it before. And even now, it’s impossible to

predict how and when it can be seen. All I know is that sometimes pirate raiders take wrong turns returning to this place because an extra planet seems to confuse their computer scanners. I don't think I've ever spoken to anyone who's *seen* this planet, mind you. Just that from time to time it flits up on the computer radar, making it look like there are thirteen planets in that solar system instead of twelve. The stories are that it's a ghost planet — and those stories have got stronger since that dead rock in the neighbouring sector blew itself to smithereens. I forget the name of the place — but it was supposed to be possessed by some demon, if you believe the drunken babble I have to listen to from time to time. I think the general pirate belief is that the soul of that planet haunts space — and that's where the invisible world story comes from."

"A ghost planet?" Tenchi's eyes narrowed. "Do you mean… Kihaku?"

"That's the one." Jiro nodded. "The world that blew up. Hit by a rocket or a meteor or some such thing — noone really knows. But there are a lot of legends about that place. Still, the story is contradictory in places, so I'm not sure how accurate it is. See, there have been records of this ghost-world showing up on pirate scanners *before* this Kihaku was obliterated. It's only more recently that I've heard people blame the phenomenon on that place — but the truth is, people were talking about it long before Kihaku exploded."

"But the pirates in this sector have changed — you've said as much yourself the last time I was here." Ryoko said pensively. "The Balta are gone, Shank was taken by Nagi, which means the Daluma are probably scattered, too. There are many unfamiliar faces these days — maybe they wouldn't know that the mystery is a lot older than just the past year or so since Kihaku was blown up."

"Yes." Jiro confirmed.

"Do we believe in ghost planets, Ryoko?" Tenchi looked doubtful. Ryoko frowned, shaking her head.

"No, we don't." She said firmly. "Wherever Ryo Ohki set down, it was on terra firma. This planet exists, it's just hidden for some reason. Which means we have to find it. And if other pirate scanners have picked it up, then Ryo Ohki must be able to find it, too. Surely?"

"Unless it's what Jiro-san said." Tenchi frowned. "That it only appears on occasion. That whatever cloaks it from the outside universe gets weakened from time to time… or something happens by which its presence grows stronger."

“I once heard a rumour that a planet’s atmosphere grows more potent the moment someone dies.” Jiro said off-handedly. “Although it sounds like nonsense to me. How a single person can alter the life force of a planet is beyond my understanding.”

“But we’ve seen Tsunami’s influence have a huge impact on Jurai’s life force, haven’t we?” Tenchi realised. “I wonder if that is it. I wonder if this planet only becomes visible when someone dies?”

“Or is intentionally killed.” Ryoko said grimly. “Because if we’re talking about a whole world, Tenchi, surely people die more often than once in a while. This must be something more significant — if it is death related, it must be a specific type of death. The pictures Ryo Ohki gave me of this place were of some savage paradise. I wonder, if this does only happen from time to time… maybe we’re dealing with ritual sacrifice of some sort. In which case, Washu is in more trouble than we thought.”

“That’s a leap and a jump from logic, surely?” Jiro looked startled. Ryoko shook her head.

“Not if you’d encountered some of the things we have in recent years.” She said darkly. “And if the planet only does become visible on any level when someone dies — or is sacrificed — then we might not see where we’re going until it’s too late and Washu is already…”

She faltered, and Tenchi saw a flicker of genuine emotion in his companion’s eye. He shook his head, resting his hand gently on hers as he did so.

“We’re going to find the planet before that.” He said firmly. “So let’s go and resume our search, okay? You should look at it another way — if Jiro-san’s theory is right, then Washu must still be alive. The planet hasn’t become visible, so if he’s right, noone has died yet.”

“I suppose so.” Ryoko sighed. She nodded, getting to her feet and fumbling in her pocket for a handful of space coin as she did so. She set it down on the bar, casting Jiro a faint smile.

“I know we didn’t drink here today, but you deserve this anyhow.” She said flippantly. “I don’t know when the next time will be I’ll see you, so take care and don’t let these rookie pirates push you people around. Okay?”

“Count on it, Ryoko.” Jiro grinned. “And good luck with your quest. I hope…”

He faltered, then lowered his voice.

“I hope you find your mother.” He said softly. “But I’m sure, if anyone can, it’s you.”

“Well, I guess we’re going to find out.” Ryoko said frankly. “Okay, Tenchi. We’re done here. Let’s go see what we can find.”

“So where exactly are you taking me, Tadashi?”

Washu slipped along the dark, narrow passageways behind her guide, struggling to keep up with his darting about as they went deeper and deeper into the centre of the planet. “I don’t mean to sound rude, but we’ve been going a long time, and I’ve completely lost any bearings I might have had. Is that part of the plan, so I don’t remember where you’ve taken me? Or is it supposed to be this convoluted?”

“These tracks and pathways were made by ancestors of mine. Well, of my people.” Tadashi said simply, not hesitating for one moment in his progress as he answered her question. “Beneath the earth here, there are several shrines and funerary temples. When we first began living on this world, the people were very divided. Each had a different way to bury their dead. Some preferred to give themselves to flame, some to the water. Others wanted to be interred close to the heart of the planet, in the hope that they might generate the World’s protection. Over time, things have merged together. Most people know their tribal origins, and respect them. But in a lot of ways we’re just one people now.”

“One people under the Priestess, Yuzuha.” Washu said softly. Tadashi faltered, stopping in his tracks, and Washu had to act quickly so as to not run into him.

“Hey.” She complained. “Are we moving forwards or aren’t we?”

“I’m sorry.” Tadashi looked apologetic, turning to cast her a smile. “Yes, it’s true. One people under Yuzuha-sama’s regime.”

“I get the feeling it’s not a happy place to be.”

“Commenting on that might cost me my life.”

“So might sheltering me, but you are helping me anyway.” Washu leant up against the tunnel wall, folding her arms across her chest as she regarded him thoughtfully. “We’re well away from your chamber now, Tadashi. Surely noone can hear us this far underground.”

“No, I suppose not.” Tadashi frowned, absently slipping his hand beneath his uniform as he retrieved his glittering blue-black pendant,

rolling it between his fingers. “I’m just not sure what else to say about it. Especially not to you, when I don’t know who you are or why you even came here.”

“Well, I can tell you that much. It’s not a big story.” Washu said comfortably. “I was on my way home from a planet called Airai. A friend of mine lives there, and it was my first time visiting. I saw this world and it intrigued me. It reminded me of something I saw, a long time ago. So I decided to land here. When I did so, I was taken prisoner by people wearing the same thing you’re wearing now. And that’s as far as it goes, Tadashi. I’m not a spy nor an enemy. I simply am a traveller caught up in your planet’s problems.”

“Then how is it you speak our tongue?” Tadashi demanded. “Yuzuha was very specific about that. That our language was foreign to all worlds outside our boundaries. That she had been to many places, but that our World was dead, and so was our mother-tongue. The only way we could preserve who we were would be to stay here, under her protection. We have been invaded in the past. She claimed she could prevent it from ever happening again.”

“But isn’t what she’s done, then, an invasion of sorts?”

“An invasion into men’s souls and minds, yes.” Tadashi sighed. “But we mustn’t talk about that here.”

“Then what can we talk about?” Washu questioned. “She said you were Kii — but Kihaku is a dead planet. Was she lying to me? You speak the language of the Kii, but… I don’t understand how you can be from Kihaku.”

“I was born on this world, as were my parents, my grandparents and many before that.” Tadashi said softly. “Whether you call us Kii or not, I don’t know. Rikishouki has been our home for generations. But once, we belonged to that world. Many, many millennia in the past, our ancestors came from Kihaku in search of their freedom. So I suppose, in a sense, we are Kii.”

He frowned.

“But is that not also true for you? Must you not also be descended from such a source, to speak so fluently our words?”

Washu was silent for a moment, contemplating his words.

“Washu-san?”

“I really don’t know enough to answer that, yet.” Washu said at length. “You are taking me somewhere specific, aren’t you, Tadashi?

Then we should continue, and I'm sorry for the delay."

"Yes." Tadashi seemed to gather his wits, nodding his head. "We're not far, not now. There's a chamber a few yards along on the right. Follow me — through the archway. It's a cluttered, dusty room… but it is a short cut to the final place I want to take you."

"Short cut sounds good to me. These tunnels are oppressive." Washu admitted. "I'm not claustrophobic, but I can't say I like it down here."

"Nor I, but sometimes it is best." Tadashi responded simply. "Through this way. Mind the uneven step — along here. This is the chamber I mentioned."

Washu did as she was bidden, stopping dead as she registered the room's contents. Though it was much as her companion had said, dark, dusty and cluttered with paraphernalia, one item in particular caught her eye and she took a couple of steps forward, resting a tentative hand on the outstretched wing of the eagle statue.

"The Eagle of Kihaku." She whispered. Tadashi nodded, looking surprised.

"Then you do know something of our culture."

"Far more than you could ever imagine." Washu bit her lip, running a finger over the strange, glittering eyes of the beast, which seemed to glow and hum at her touch. She let out a gasp, withdrawing her hand almost immediately as a swirl of energy pulsed through her, prickling at her senses as if charged with mystical electricity.

"What is this stone?" She whispered. "The eyes of this bird… what are they made from?"

"Meteor rock." Tadashi frowned, looping his hand beneath his pendant once more and holding it up for her to see. "A year ago now, a flaming rock hit Rikishouki. Some believe it was a divine message from the Eagle of Kihaku… but Yuzuha-sama said it was simply a meteor — that such things happened in space and only fools gave them any more credence than that. I don't know what meteor means — the word is foreign, and I have no way of translating it into Kii. But I guess it means it came from outside of Rikishouki. Noone really knows where it came from."

"About a year ago?" Washu knelt beneath the overhanging wings of the bird statue, gazing up at it as she did so. "I see."

"The rock certainly behaves like nothing on Rikishouki." Tadashi

continued. “It glows and glitters and some say they can sense more in it… I don’t know. But it has been known to… to excite Kii sight in people. Visions. I’m not sure if it’s true. I don’t know anything any more, in truth — but if the Eagle really had come to save us, why would it take him so long?”

Washu looked grave.

“Perhaps it’s taken this very long to find you.” She said softly, idly tracing her fingers along the carved words at the Eagle’s base. “Do you know what this says?”

“What what says?” Tadashi crouched at her side, squinting at the engraving in the dim light. “No. I’m sorry, but some of the things carved by the Ancient Ones we cannot read. Not all of their writings survived into our generation. Some were brought from Kihaku as plunder by the Settlers, when our people were forced to leave. Others were written by scribes whose talents were passed down in limited ways. I don’t know what it says… though I think that the central one is the symbol for Eagle.”

Washu bit her lip.

“It says ’The Eagle sleeps, awaiting the return of the ones who serve his soul. Blessed of the Eagle, Chosen of the World.” She murmured, raising her solemn green eyes to his startled ones. ‘And then these characters… these letters underneath. They say “Priest’ and… and a tribal name. An… an old tribal name.”

“Really?” Tadashi stared. “How can you… are you sure? You can read the ancient lettering?”

“Yes, I can.” Washu straightened herself, eying him ruefully. “But this isn’t getting anywhere. This statue is old, true enough, but you said it was crafted here on Rikishouki. And I’m still not completely understanding what’s going on here, but I doubt a dusty old statue will answer those questions. You said we had further to go — so lets go.”

“No.” Tadashi’s brows drew together in consternation and he rested his hand on his sword, as if ready to draw it at any moment. “No, we go no further. I seek to help you, Washu-san, but I want to know who you are, first. You can speak our words, you claim to read the ancient letters that not even the most scholarly of our people can read. Tell me who you are, and why you really came to Rikishouki. I will take you no further until I know your true errand — so speak.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

Well, so they were finally on their way.

Seiryo glanced at the controls of his ship briefly, flicking the switch to auto-pilot as he got to his feet, casting a final gaze around the drive room of the Unko before heading back into the main body of the ship. As he stepped into the craft's spacious living area, he caught sight of his travel companion huddled up against the back of her seat, gazing with frightened eyes across the dark star-speckled landscape of space and he sighed, coming to sit down beside her.

"Tokimi?" He murmured, and the girl turned towards him, relief touching her expression.

"Nii-chan." She whispered. "We are… Jurai is… all the way away there now, isn't it?"

She pointed towards the space-scene outside, and Seiryo nodded, slipping a comforting arm around her as he did so.

"To help Washu we had to leave Jurai behind us for a while." He said softly. "But I promise we will go back, Tokimi. As soon as we've found Washu, we'll go home. Okay?"

"Home is gone." Tokimi said absently, toying with a stray lock of her hair. "All gone. Like Kihaku. Jurai isn't there any more… not at all."

"Jurai is still there." Seiryo assured her. "We've just travelled away from it. That's all. It's like when you leave the Estate and go walking to the palace to visit Sasami-sama. The house is still there when you walk back. And Jurai will be there when we fly back, too. It's not like Kihaku. Jurai will still be there."

"You promise?" Tokimi looked doubtful, and Seiryo nodded.

"I promise." He agreed quietly.

"So where are we going, then?" Tokimi tilted her head on one side, eying him quizzically. "Where is Washu-neechan?"

"As yet, I'm not entirely sure." Seiryo admitted. "But I do think we need some help. We're going to the Galaxy Police, Tokimi. I want to

ask Kiyone to come along with us — since she's probably the only Galaxy Police employee who'll speak to me, considering."

"The Police are coming?" Tokimi's eyes became big. Seiryo nodded.

"Hopefully." He agreed. "I think it will help, to have them on our side."

He frowned, shooting his companion a sidelong glance.

"Tokimi, I need to ask you to do something, also." He said softly.

"Yes? What is it?" Tokimi looked startled. "What can Tokimi do?"

"I want you to write down those words that Sasami-sama scribed on the ground." Seiryo spoke gently, feeling her body tense even as he spoke the words. "I know that it's not a prayer you like — that it's to do with death. But it might be helpful… will you do that for me? If I give you a pen and some paper, will you write down the prayer, like Sasami-sama did?"

"I… I don't know." Tokimi bit her lip. "Sasami did not write all of the prayer… she did not finish it. Finishing it…"

She faltered, and Seiryo sighed.

"Noone will die if you finish writing it, I swear." He said quietly. "I won't let that happen, you should know that. And it might help find Washu quicker, if I know what I'm looking at. I need your help here — will you do it?"

"I suppose so." Tokimi let out a gusty sigh, but nodded her head, and Seiryo reached for a scrap of paper, fumbling in his pocket for a pen as he held them out to her.

"Write it… in Kii?" Tokimi looked hesitant. Seiryo nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "And then you can tell me what each thing means. Just in case it's important… can you do that?"

"I can." Tokimi said reluctantly. "I will. For Nii-chan and Washu-neechan, I will."

She took the pen clumsily in her slender fingers, pausing for a moment, then beginning to carefully scribe columns of strange characters. As Seiryo glanced at them, he frowned, shaking his head.

"I wish I could follow it, but I can't." He admitted, frustration clear in his tones, and Tokimi paused, glancing up at him in surprise and consternation.

"Nii-chan cannot read it." She murmured. "Nii-chan doesn't

understand Kii… Kii letters are different from on Jurai.”

“Now you know why I need your help so badly.” Seiryo acknowledged. “Is that it? All of the prayer?”

“Yes.” Tokimi nodded her head.

“Will you read it for me?”

“In Kii?”

“Yes… then translate it for me, please. I want to try and understand how it’s written down. Somehow I’m sure this is the key to what Princess Sasami saw, but I can’t quite figure out why. At least if I understand the pattern, I might be able to make some progress. After all, Kii is practically a dead language. But the Princess’s vision was very clear, so this must have something to do with Kihaku and with Washu’s past.”

“And Tokimi’s past.” Tokimi said absently. Seiryo shot her a sharp look, then nodded his head.

“As you say.” He agreed evenly. “Trace your finger alongside the characters as you read it please, Toki-chan. I want to understand your writing as best as I can.”

“All… All right.” Tokimi agreed hesitantly, pressing her finger to the page. Carefully and slowly she read out the prayer in her native tongue, and Seiryo listened carefully to the sounds, picking up the unusual inflections that littered the girl’s speech. It was a gentle, rhythmic sound, but try as he might, he could find no logic to its construction. He frowned.

“And now in Galactic Tongue?” He pressed gently. “If you can. Trace the words again, Tokimi-chan. Then I’ll understand more easily what you’re trying to say.”

“*The World does not begin*.” Tokimi obediently recited the words anew, though her discomfort was clear in her sapphire-blue eyes as she did so. “*The World does not end. All are subject to the World, sheltered beneath the wings of the eagle God.*”

She paused, then tapped her nail against one of the characters.

“This is not a word.” She said softly. “I don’t know how to explain. It is… when you use an important name. Like for Sasami. It is… it is like that.”

“A mark of status, maybe? Like a title?” Seiryo suggested. Tokimi hesitated, then shrugged.

“It means that the Eagle is more than anything else.” She said softly. “He is the World. That is all.”

“All right.” Seiryo pursed his lips. “And you wouldn’t say it out loud?”

Tokimi shook her head.

“It is a holy symbol.” She said simply. “It is only written, but must be written. It is respect for the Kami-sama.”

“I think I understand.” Seiryo said carefully. “So the equivalent would be, if we were to write Tsunami’s name down… you’d think to include that symbol after her name, to mark out the fact that she’s a Goddess and so more important than anyone else?”

“Yes.” Tokimi’s eyes flickered with relief. “That is it.”

“Fine. Then I’m with you. Go on.” Seiryo gestured back towards the sheet of paper. “What does the rest of it say? The bit Princess Sasami didn’t write down, I’m guessing… what does it mean?”

“*In darkness and in light, so I become one with the World, and watch over those whose souls have faith*.” Tokimi said softly, and Seiryo squinted at the sheet, indicating one of the characters as he did so.

“There’s that symbol again.” He reflected. “This is heavy duty doctrine for Kihaku, isn’t it?”

“I don’t understand.” Tokimi looked bewildered.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter.” Seiryo shook his head. “All right. We’ve some time before we get to Headquarters, so will you go through these letters with me one by one? I want to be sure I’d recognise them again, if I saw them. It strikes me that, if Sasami-sama wrote them down, maybe they’re written somewhere where Washu is being held. And though I want your help, Tokimi, I don’t want to put you in any danger. I want to be sure that I can identify these pictures from any others that I see — just in case. I don’t know how many letters the Kii use for their language, but if they’re all so complicated…”

“There are many.” Tokimi admitted. “I… I do not know them all. Many tribes never write down their language. The Priest’s tribe, they write things down. And the Scribes of the Priest and those the Priest has taught. Like me. But even Father did not know all the letters of his ancestors.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.” Seiryo acknowledged. “I think I’ll recognise *that* one — I’ve seen it before, on Juraian paintings. It’s

changed somewhat from what I know, but it means Kihaku, doesn't it? The symbol for the World."

"The Eagle Feather." Tokimi nodded, then her eyes widened, and she grabbed up the pencil once again, scrawling two distinctive characters onto the page.

"What does that say?" Seiryo looked puzzled.

"*Washu*." Tokimi whispered. "Washu is called Eagle Feather. See, here are the letters."

"That doesn't look the same character to me."

"Kii has many letters for Eagle. The Eagle is important on Kihaku, but only one letter means the Kami-sama." Tokimi said with a shrug. "It is wrong to name a baby with the Kami-sama's letter. So Father used a different letter. But it means the same. It means Feather of the Eagle."

"Daughter of Kihaku, in other words." Seiryo rubbed his chin. "He wasn't mincing his words when he named her, was he? He really saw her as his heiress, when he passed on to whatever afterlife your people believed in."

Tokimi looked troubled, but she did not reply. Instead she idly began to sketch the vague form of an eagle onto the paper before them. Seiryo frowned, eying her keenly.

"Tokimi? What are you doing now?"

"Nothing." Tokimi dropped the pencil with a clatter, pushing the sheet away and getting to her feet. "Nii-chan, Tokimi is tired. Tokimi… I… I don't know where we are, and… and I… I didn't sleep last night."

Seiryo's eyes narrowed, but he nodded his head.

"Then you should get some rest." He said gently. "Go take a nap. It's a while before we get to Headquarters, and I want to spend some time looking at these letters myself."

"All right." Tokimi looked relieved. She gazed at the paper, making a curious gesture with her hands. Then she was gone across the ship towards the little chamber he had prepared for her use, and Seiryo sighed, slowly shaking his head as he scooped up his companion's discarded sheet.

"Well, it's something to go on, but I wonder." He murmured. "It has her on edge, and I don't like that it does. I feel like I'm forcing her…

but she did say she wanted to help Washu.”

He glanced at the characters, pursing his lips.

“Eagle feather, huh?” He mused. “That’s interesting. Washu never told me that… in fact, she glosses over her connections to Kihaku’s coronet most of the time. I know she was heiress at one point — because that’s why Tokimi took control. I wonder if this is all connected somehow… have we not seen the last of the planet Kihaku after all?”

“So the prisoner has escaped?”

Yuzuha drew her cloak more closely around her body, turning her glittering, orb-like eyes on first one guard and then the other as she tried to digest what they were telling her. “How, pray, is that possible? The woman was locked in a cell, was she not? A barred door and cuffed, too? How could she possibly escape?”

“Lady Yuzuha, she… the door… it exploded.” The first guard stumbled to his knees before his mistress, fear in his eyes as he grovelled at her feet, and hesitantly his companion followed suit, making fervent gestures of obeissance as he did so. “We do not know by what manner of magic it happened, but… but…”

“I see.” Yuzuha’s eyes narrowed, and she held up her hand to prevent the man from continuing. “An explosion? In the prison quarters? And yet you were guarding this place all the time and you know nothing?”

“We were… we were outside the confines of the dungeon, Lady Yuzuha.” The first man said hurriedly. “We were not… we did not…”

“What orders did I give you two?” Yuzuha’s aura shimmered with dark energy, and the men shrank back, terrified by her sudden show of anger. “When I sent you there, what did I tell you!”

“To guard the prisoner, Yuzuha-sama.” The second man whispered. Yuzuha nodded, a curt bob of her head that sent the folds of her heavy hood billowing in the draughty chamber.

“To guard the prisoner.” She echoed softly. “And yet, where were you waiting? Outside? Are you boys or guardsmen? Do you understand what it means to guard a prisoner, either of you? The woman was in your power… you should have watched over her without fail. And now… now she is escaped…”

“Lady Yuzuha, we are sorry. We are truly sorry.” The first man

prostrated himself on the ground before her, and Yuzuha snorted.

“I want her found.” She said, her tones dangerously low. “And more, I want to know who helped her to escape. A guileless wanderer she may have been, but either way, I want to know who seeks to use her in their own schemes. You will not fail me again, either of you. If you do… you will be the ones who face the fires at dawn.”

“Lady Yuzuha!” The second man’s eyes opened wide with fright, and Yuzuha nodded again.

“Make no mistake, it’s not an idle threat.” She said evenly. “So go now, gather your companions and find this missing woman. Dead or alive, I care not which. But find her, and find her quickly. I will not have outsiders tramping around our planet, and more, I will not be made a fool of by idiot heathens unable to properly do their duties!”

She gestured towards the door and it creaked back, watching in derision as the two men scrambled to their feet, hurrying from the chamber before she could change her mind.

“Such fools.” She muttered, turning on her heel and moving towards the back of the chamber. “But this is concerning. That woman… was she just a simple traveller, after all? No sign has been found of a spaceship, it’s true. And yet… and yet…”

Her frown deepened.

“She did not seem unusual, when I spoke to her.” She mused. “She seemed much like the others who have been fool enough to wander into the planet’s atmosphere. But I’ve been so careful to cloak this world from view from ships that pass it by. The last thing I want is powerful people like those damned Juraians deciding to hunt me down to this place, after all. Heathens they might be, but those stupid, frightened people provide me with shelter and power, with remarkably little effort. And as for the few who slip in…”

Her eyes narrowed once more, flames of energy flickering in their depths.

“Keeping the people in fear of invasion is important.” She reflected. “And invoking a Kii tradition to do it seems to have worked as well as anything in maintaining my grip on this world. If only I did not have to let down my guard to witness such events… I’m sure that is what draws the strangers in, in the moments when I am not able to hold the shield as I should like. But then again…”

She faltered, her thick brows drawing together under the hem of her hood as she contemplated.

“I have not let the shield down for some days.” She realised. “No sacrifices have been made in well over a month. So how, then, did this traveller come to find us? How did she get here?”

She clenched her fists.

“I must find her, and I must destroy her.” She decided firmly. “As soon as possible. It won’t matter who she is or where she came from if she is dead. And if there are fools planning insurrection by releasing her, well, they will burn as well. This is my world now — noone here is powerful enough to challenge me. This Kii Priestess of legend, and this wretched eagle — they are all just myths. Stories told to the fools who wanted something to believe in. Well, now they have my power to believe in. They don’t need anything else. And I will make sure of it. Rikishouki is my world now… noone and *nothing* will intervene.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

For a moment Washu stood there, eying her companion as a silence that threatened to become oppressive spread across the chamber. At length she sighed, shaking her head.

“You won’t kill me.” She said softly. “So you might as well stop pretending that you will. You do want to help me, even if you aren’t sure whether or not I will hurt you.”

Tadashi started, drawing his weapon half out of it’s rough scabbard before halting, casting the scientist a frown.

“Why do you think that’s true?” He asked. “I am a guard of Yuzuha-sama’s retinue. You yourself said I wear the same uniform as the ones who imprisoned you. Why do you think I couldn’t hurt you, if it came to the crunch?”

“Because you don’t believe I’ve come here to cause harm.” Washu said gently. “And you aren’t like the others. They have a dull sheen to their eyes — they’re not acting in their full wits. You’re different. You look at me and I can see you’re in possession of all of your senses. That means you can be reasoned with, and I think you’re intelligent. More, I don’t think you like bloodshed. So you might draw your sword on me, but I don’t think you’ll touch me with it. I don’t think that’s the kind of man you are, Tadashi. Are you going to prove me wrong?”

Tadashi bit his lip, shaking his head in frustration as he rammed his weapon back into its holder.

“No.” He admitted reluctantly. “Though you shouldn’t assume you can tell what someone is thinking. On this planet, you never know what anyone is thinking. Not these days. It’s not always so easy to spot who is one of Yuzuha’s followers and who isn’t. Not until it’s too late.”

“Then the Kii sight is a dead art in you people?” Washu raised an eyebrow. “I see.”

Tadashi’s brows knitted together.

“How do you know so much about the Kii?” He demanded. “Who are you? Why have you come here? Please tell me what’s going on. I’m confused. I don’t want to believe you’re a threat, but you won’t

answer any questions and…”

“Tadashi?”

A fresh voice came from the corridor behind where the guardsman stood and he visibly jumped, swinging around to face the intruder with a mixture of surprise and alarm.

“Mayuka! Mayu-chan, what are you doing here!” He demanded in low tones. “Everything is in chaos above ground — you shouldn’t have ventured up through the tunnels! It’s dangerous!”

“I thought I heard your voice from the Eagle’s resting place.” The newcomer said softly, and as she stepped into Washu’s line of sight, the scientist realised this newcomer was little older than eighteen or nineteen, her rich amethyst waves of hair braided back from her face in a hauntingly familiar Kii style. She wore simple robes, not dissimilar to the village attire Washu remembered from the families she had often visited with her father, but there was no tribal symbol stitched onto the breast, and the sash at her waist was white, instead of coloured with the insignia of the clan. Around her wrists she wore bracelets made of the same strange rock that Washu had observed on the Eagle statue only a short time earlier, and as she glanced at the girl, Washu noticed the stone glittered faintly against her skin, as if pulsing with a faint energy.

“Well, now you should go back. Back where it’s safe.” Tadashi seemed quite unsettled by her presence, and Washu smiled ruefully, leaning up against the wall as she observed the attraction between the two.

“The sender of the letter, no doubt.” She mused to herself.

“Tadashi, what’s wrong with you! Why are you acting like this — and why were you talking to yourself?” Mayuka seemed oblivious to Washu’s presence, and with a jolt the scientist realised that the arc of the statue’s wing concealed her from the girl’s view. “I know you weren’t praying — you don’t speak to the Eagle these days.”

There was a faint reproach in the girl’s voice, and Washu was almost sure she saw Tadashi flinch guiltily. He shook his head, however, taking her by the hand.

“It’s not that. And this isn’t the time to discuss the Eagle.” He murmured. “Mayuka, we’re not alone… the woman Yuzuha took prisoner is with me.”

“You brought her down here already?” Mayuka’s eyes became wide and she glanced all around her, as if seeking the mysterious stranger.

“But I thought you were going to wait for an opportune moment — Tadashi, what have you done? You’ll get into trouble, and then…”

“I escaped on my own.” Washu stepped out of the shadows at that moment, startling both of the youngsters as she did so. “Your friend and I ran into one another, and he offered me his aid… there didn’t seem to be much else to be done at the time.”

Mayuka opened her lips to speak, but as she caught sight of Washu’s face, her eyes opened wide with amazement and disbelief. She rushed forward, reaching out as if to grab Washu by the hands, but at the last minute she stopped, dropping to her knees instead and gazing up at the scientist with a strange, awestruck look in her fuschia eyes. Despite herself, Washu felt the admiration and hope that radiated from the girl, and she bit her lip, somewhat discomfitted by it.

“Is something the matter?” She asked softly. “Why are you looking at me like that… I may have come from outside your world, but I’m not here to harm you.”

At this Mayuka’s eyes became even bigger, and tears glittered on her lashes as she held out her hands.

“Miko.” She murmured. “Oh, I knew… I knew you would come. I knew you would!”

“What did you call me?” It was Washu’s turn to be startled now, as Tadashi hastened to his girlfriend’s side, putting a hand on her shoulder as he tried to make sense of the situation.

“You *are* the Priestess, aren’t you?” Mayuka fixed Washu with a shining gaze. “You are… you must be. You’re here, standing before me… standing beneath the wing of the Eagle… oh, I knew it was true! I knew my dream was true!”

“Mayuka, you’re babbling.” Tadashi looked mystified, glancing from the girl to the scientist and back again. “What are you talking about?”

“She’s the woman from my dream, Tadashi.” Mayuka whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks now as she struggled to keep her voice level. “The one I saw… the Priestess. It was her… I know it was. The World spoke to me… he told me… and now… now here you are.”

“You seem to be a little confused.” Washu looked stricken, shaking her head. “I’m no Priestess. I’m a scientist — a Professor — and…”

“Is it a test, Miko-sama?” Mayuka asked softly. “Are you seeking to

test my belief in you? Because it doesn't waver. I know who you are. I know who you must be. My vision… it was so strong. So very strong. And your face…"

She scrambled to her feet, her eyes never leaving the other's face for a moment.

"It *is* you." She breathed.

"Well, this is awkward." Washu frowned. "I'm not going to convince you otherwise, am I?"

"Is she telling the truth? Are you… are you what she says you are?" Tadashi eyed Washu warily.

"I'm a scientist." Washu repeated slowly. "Professor Washu Hakubi, that's all, and… what now?"

As Mayuka let out a shriek of triumph, gripping Washu tightly by the hands.

"It *is* you! It *is* you! You *are* the daughter of the Hakubi tribe!" She exclaimed. "Your own words confirm it — my faith in you is true!"

"Damn." Washu bit her lip, berating herself inwardly for letting her name slip out so readily. "You can't seriously think that I'm some jumped up holy woman, can you? I mean, come on now. Anyone who knows anything about Kihaku knows that the population there died out a long time ago. Do you really think I could be quite so young and beautiful if I were as old as all that?"

Mayuka's grip tightened around her fingers, and Washu felt her heart sink into her chest at the veneration in the young girl's eyes.

"You know about Kihaku. You speak our language." She whispered. "Your name is Hakubi. Who else could you be? You must come… come with me. I must show you — you must see!"

And before Washu knew what was happening, she found herself dragged forcibly across the chamber, back through the opening that Mayuka had first emerged from and along another dark and narrow hallway until they reached a dome shaped chamber which was obviously furnished — however simply — as a kind of bed chamber. Torches burned brightly around the walls in aging sconces, and Washu had the eerie sensation that this room had once been crafted as a tomb, not as living quarters.

"I need you to see this. The book — you must see this." Mayuka was gesturing to her excitedly now, and Washu forced the thought from her mind, struggling to reassert herself as she registered the

large, old volume that now lay atop Mayuka's worn bedcovers. Hesitantly she approached it, and despite her reticence, the age of the tome intrigued her. Gently she brushed her finger against the wooden covers, biting her lip as she did so.

"Father?" She murmured doubtfully.

"There is a story inside." Mayuka said eagerly, reaching over to open the book. "The first half of the volume is all in old script — some of it we can't even read. But someone else began writing, after that point. It's in a different hand. And they write… they write about the Hakubi, Miko-sama. They mention… they mention the Priest, and his daughter, Tokimi-sama, who cleansed Kihaku from settlers at the behest of the World. But they… they also mention… someone else. Miko-sama… I had a dream. A vision. You were there, dressed in the robes of Kihaku. You were glowing — glittering with light. I had never laid eyes on your face before, and yet, here you are, standing before me. It's as if your presence here caused my vision. As if somehow, some force knew you had come. Maybe it was you yourself — I don't know. I just know that… that this is who you are, no matter how much you deny it. You are the Priestess — the Hakubi that disappeared from history and into myth."

She gestured to the passage she had earlier read aloud to Tadashi, and Washu bent to read it, squinting in the flickering light of the torch flame. As she did so, her brows drew together, and she swallowed hard. Slowly she raised her gaze to her companions.

"My name is written here." She admitted slowly.

"Your name?" Tadashi was at their side in an instant, staring down at the book's pages as he did so. "Where? How?"

Hesitantly, Washu ran her nail alongside the characters that Mayuka had been unable to make out, and Mayuka let out a yelp of excitement.

"So that's what it says." She whispered. "I could only read it as an Eagle's feather. I didn't know… but… but it says your name?"

"It says Washu." Washu sighed heavily, sinking down onto Mayuka's bed and burying her head in her hands. "And I thought I'd done all I could to disappear from Kii's historical records. My father thought I was dead… and so I was, where Kihaku was concerned. Yet here, in this place, it's as if nothing has ever changed. Nothing has moved on. I'm unsettled — I don't like it."

She sighed.

“I don’t know why I should even have said my name, but it’s like something in the air here has affected my thoughts.” She admitted. “Like something strong is calling out to me, and dashing my concentration. I’m speaking without thinking, and that’s a dangerous thing for someone with a memory as long and torrid as mine.”

“It is the Eagle.” Mayuka whispered, holding out her wrists so that Washu could see the glittering rock that comprised her bracelets. “The stone sent in the Eagle’s meteor. It makes me feel different, too. I can see you as the Priestess… even dressed as you are. I can see your true nature — a gift that my people have lost. But with this stone, I can truly see you as you are… the last of the Hakubi tribe. Our Priestess, come to free us once again.”

“Oh, I’m not even half of those things.” Washu said ruefully. “I’m nothing more than a coward and a turncoat where my world is concerned. And… wait, what did you just say? The stone from the meteor… may I see it more closely, please?”

“Of course.” Mayuka looked startled, but obediently slid one of the bracelets from her wrists, holding it out. Washu reached out a finger to touch it tentatively, letting out a gasp of surprise as the stone shone with a bright blue light, sending the same prickling electricity through her fingers as that she had felt when she had touched the Eagle statue’s eyes. Mayuka’s mouth became an ‘o’ of surprise, and she gazed at Washu in astonishment.

“But… what divine power was that?”

“Kihaku.” Washu bit her lip. “This is from Kihaku. It’s Kii rock, from the core of that world. When Kihaku exploded, the meteor… that’s where it came from. And why it has such a potent effect on my memories and emotions. It never really did before, that’s why I didn’t realise at first. But my magic… my magic is awake inside me now in a way it never was before. And the rock knows it. It senses that magic. It’s like it… it’s calling to me. I don’t like it. I’ve never experienced anything like it before.”

“The World has chosen you to do its bidding.” Mayuka said solemnly. “Miko-sama, this is the Eagle’s will. You can’t abandon your people now, surely? We need you — we need you more than we ever have.”

Washu sighed, holding up her hands.

“Wait a minute.” She said quietly. “I didn’t say I was any kind of Priestess, so stop calling me it. It’s creeping me out, and the way you’re staring at me is too weird — I feel like I’ve grown an extra ear

or something overnight. Whatever and whoever you think I am, there's a lot that neither one of us understand. And I need to know a lot more about this world. How it came to be. Why it's an extension of Kihaku's culture. What happened here, and how Yuzuha came to be in power. I need to understand these things — because right now I don't know anything at all. All I do know is that I'm miles from my home and family and that doesn't make me particularly happy. So let's rewind a few steps and get some things straight, shall we?"

"But…" Mayuka began, but Tadashi rested a hand on her shoulder, shaking his head.

"Let her speak." He said softly. "This is a wild fancy of yours, Mayuka. I know how badly you want to find your Priestess, but the truth is that we don't even know if she's real, let alone alive."

Washu frowned, inwardly making up her mind as she gently closed the volume that still lay beside her on the bed. She scooped it up, running a careful finger over the lettering of the cover.

"My father wrote this book." She said softly, her voice no more than a whisper. "These are his letters. I recognise them as if he'd done it yesterday. This was his… it came from Kihaku. The script you showed me — that wasn't his writing. But this… this was a volume he began. A long time ago."

"Your father?"

"The last true Priest of Kihaku." Washu said simply.

"Then you *are* the Priestess!"

"No, I'm not." Washu shook her head. "Listen. I left Kihaku. I chose not to be Priestess. I didn't ever bond with the World and I didn't ever lead any rituals. I might be born of Hakubi blood, and I won't deny it. This rock has addled my senses enough to make me honest with you, after all. But I'm a far cry from whatever heroine you were expecting. I told you. I ran away from my responsibilities. I left my world. I had no intention of ever going back — and when I did, the planet was devoid of all life. Everything was gone. I thought that meant an end to my people, too. So I made my life elsewhere."

"The World ordained that Kihaku should be stripped of life." Mayuka said sadly. "The Settlers came, they brought weapons and they slew the Priest. The World was angry and he punished the people. The Priestess Tokimi acted on his will. That is the story we are told… the story of Kihaku's last days."

"And you and your people? You came here how?"

“Aboard some Settler craft.” Tadashi settled himself on the floor, leaning up against the wood-beam doorframe as he contemplated the question. “So history tells us. Refugees who overpowered the Settler crew, and took control of the devil contraption. It crash-landed here, on Rikishouki. Those who survived began to live here, and re-establish things in the old way. Even though it was a new World, and there was no true Priest — that is what they did.”

“I see.” Washu looked thoughtful. “So your ancestors were escaped prisoners from Juraian transport vehicles, were they? And this is where they ended up. Were there many?”

“Three hundred or so, from various scattered tribespeople.” Tadashi shrugged his shoulders. “But none of your blood, Washu-sama. And none of Lady Tokimi’s, either. The divine tribes — Hakubi and Inoue — were thought to have died with the planet’s heart, when Kihaku went dead.”

“The Inoue weren’t a divine tribe. That’s half the trouble.” Washu muttered. “Oh, this is a mess. I really should never have talked Ryo Ohki into landing here. So much is still confusing me.”

“And us, also.” Mayuka settled herself more comfortably on the bedcovers, eying her companion earnestly. “But we have time to talk. Noone comes to me here except Tadashi… noone will interrupt us. This chamber was built as a burial vault, but never used. Ensconced among our ancestors, we are well hidden for now.”

“You *live* down here?” Washu looked startled. Mayuka nodded.

“And always have, more or less.” She agreed sadly. “This is why we need your help, Miko-sama.”

“Mayuka is the last of her tribe, and her father ruled Rikishouki before Yuzuha came here, made men her slaves and had him and the rest of Mayuka’s people killed.” Tadashi said softly. “Mayuka survived because she was no more than a small child — they overlooked her, and my father found her, playing in the dirt next to her mother’s body. He brought her home, and my family have protected her since.”

A faint blush touched his cheeks.

“We hope to be joined, one day, but until Yuzuha is gone, it’s not possible.” He added. “I was under her spell for a time, but this fragment of the rock you say was from the World’s heart protects me, now. And Mayuka stays here, in case Yuzuha should realise who she is. It’s not a safe existance, or a fun one. But it’s how we must live, after all.”

“Your family, Tadashi-san?”

“They are also dead, though not at Yuzuha’s hand.” Tadashi said abruptly. “They were carried off by a plague in their village. I survived because I am here — at Yuzuha’s beck and call. If not for Mayuka, I’d have nothing to fall back on.”

“And the same is true for me.” Mayuka said earnestly. “We want our planet to be free again, Washu-sama — but we don’t have the strength to fight a force like Yuzuha. Will you help us? Please? Our people need you — will you please help set us all free?”

Galaxy Police Headquarters.

Seiryo paused for a moment on the entrance walkway, gazing up through the tinted glass at the imposing structure that loomed overhead, marking the central nucleus of the universe’s key law enforcement outfit. A wave of nostalgia washed over him and he grimaced ruefully, shaking his head as he got a grip on his senses.

“This is no time for idle regrets.” He murmured. “I’ve not been back here since I was under Tokimi’s control. I didn’t realise I’d feel quite so strange, when I did… I just hope they’re not going to arrest me on sight. The Emperor may have done a lot to conceal my crimes, but I’m sure that people must know. And yet, I’m here for a reason. I want Kiyone’s help finding Washu.”

He faltered for a moment, his brows knitting together as he contemplated that thought.

“That’s unlike me.” He realised. “I don’t usually go looking for help, when I’m on a mission for anyone. Especially not in a situation which I know will cause me discomfort. I’m not a team player — I’ve made that clear enough. And yet here I am, about to potentially humiliate myself in the hope of getting Kiyone to come along with Tokimi and I. Is it just to improve her training? Or am I going soft? Am I that worried about Washu’s welfare that I’ll risk coming to this place after so long away? Or is it Tokimi I’m frightened for — is it just that I don’t want to keep her away from home longer than I have to?”

“Seiryo Tennan.”

A voice startled him and he turned, seeing the familiar figure of the Galaxy Police Commander standing in the entranceway. He frowned, steeling himself, as he made his requisite bow of the head, striding forward to greet the man who had once had sway over his career.

“Commander.” He said softly. “It’s been some time, hasn’t it?”

“My security team told me that your ship was approaching.” The Commander gazed him up and down, and Seiryo realised there was no warmth to be found in his old superior’s expression. “Of all people, I didn’t expect to see you back here.”

Seiryo eyed his companion thoughtfully for a moment, then he gathered his thoughts, offering the man a slight smile.

“I’m here on official business.” He said evenly. “And I wish to speak to one of your detectives, if it’s not too much trouble.”

The Commander’s eyes narrowed, and he slowly shook his head.

“You might be a noble son of Jurai, Lord Tennan, and you might have deep enough pockets to cover up your misdeeds.” He said softly. “But I take very seriously any assault on any of my people. Your actions were a direct betrayal of the trust invested in you not only by myself but by the Galaxy Police Federation as a whole. Jurai may well have forgiven you — and I’m well aware that your Emperor appears to have done just that. But it doesn’t mean *I* have forgiven you. This is not Juraian territory. You do not have the right to enter here without my permission — as you well know.”

Seiryo’s eyes narrowed, as he absorbed the man’s words.

“You have misunderstood my motives for coming here.” He said quietly. “I carry the seal of the Princess Sasami. It is her orders I carry out. This may not be Juraian territory, Commander — but the Galaxy Police has always sought to keep good relations with the Royal House of Jurai. Whatever your personal feelings towards me, are you willing to offend the Imperial crown by refusing to hear my request?”

“I would take my chances.” The Commander said frankly. “You were one of my best agents, once upon a time — that’s one reason why this causes me so much distaste. But your actions towards Detective Makibi were unforgiveable, and caused the poor girl a lot of pain, mentally and physically. I will not have it said that I failed to protect the interests of my people, even under the pressure of Jurai’s seal.”

Seiryo frowned, his frustration threatening to bubble over inside as he regarded his former superior. Slowly he shook his head.

“When I attacked Miss Makibi, I was under a dark spell.” He said in low tones, fighting to keep his temper under control. “I was adjudged by a Court of Jurai for my crimes, at which Miss Makibi testified. I have served my punishment. Believe me, there is nothing you or even my Lord Emperor could have ordained which would have been worse

than the six months I spent recovering from the impact of that dark magic. If you believe Detective Makibi suffered for my actions, then you must realise I also suffered. The magic involved had deep-rooted psychological and physical after effects… and believe me, your comprehension of them barely scratches the surface."

"Why are you here, Lord Tennan? Really?" The Commander folded his arms across his chest. "What is your true errand… is Jurai really so insensitive as to send you, of all people, to call on me here?"

"I am Lady Sasami's advisor, by her own choosing. It is my place to be her representative where she cannot go herself." Seiryo said evenly, slipping his hand into his belt and producing the official seal that he carried with him. "As for why I am here, I am investigating the disappearance of one who is a friend not only to my own family, but the Royal House of Jurai. We believe she is in some danger, and I require assistance from the Galaxy Police. You can be assured that I would not come here and speak to you if there was another way. But I believe that Washu-sama will be found more quickly if I have your cooperation. In particular, the cooperation of Detective Makibi herself."

"Do you think I'm going to let you anywhere near Kiyone?" The Commander's eyes widened in outrage. "You must be kidding. Do you really think that I'd do such a thing after everything she's been through?"

"Miss Makibi is a close personal friend of both the Princess I serve and the woman I seek to find." Seiryo kept a firm rein on his temper, nodding his head. "And you mistake the relationship your Detective and I currently have. Since her last sojourn on Jurai, she and I have reached an accord. The past events have been buried… unlike your good self, I think she understands that the dark magic involved created more victims than just her."

"You must think me a simpleton indeed." The Commander's eyes narrowed. "Return to your ship, Lord Tennan. We have no further business. If the Imperial Crown of Jurai want the assistance of the Galaxy Police, then they can send someone else to speak to me. I will not entertain the idea of releasing one of my best detectives into the care of one who so betrayed his position. Dark magic or otherwise, I am not so quick to forgive as the Emperor of Jurai seems to be."

Seiryo's hand twitched in the direction of his sword, then he got a grip on himself, lowering his fist as he slipped the seal back into his belt.

“Aboard my spacecraft is a frightened young girl desperately seeking her sister.” He said softly. “I do not like to see her cry, and so I am not willing to turn away so easily. At least bring Miss Makibi here, and let her decide for herself how she feels about accompanying us to find Washu. If she refuses, I will leave without incident and accept the blame of it with my Emperor and my Lady Princess. But if not for my sake, for the sake of Washu’s sister — let me speak to Detective Makibi. I will not ask you to leave us alone together — I understand why you do not trust me. But this is about more than my past crimes, Commander. Someone’s life may be at stake — someone who is dear to many people. And for that reason, I will not give up so soon.”

The Commander stared at him in surprise, and to Seiryo’s astonishment, a faint, grudging flicker of respect stirred in the older man’s eyes. He frowned, nodding his head slowly.

“Then follow me to my office.” He said curtly. “And I will summon Detective Makibi there. But I warn you, Lord Tennan… you are not on Juraian ground here. Any untoward actions here will be reported in full to your Emperor, and we will not be so keen to cover up events as your noble King seems to be.”

“I accept your terms, Commander.” Seiryo inclined his head slightly. “Thank you.”

“It’s not for your sake.” The Commander assured him coldly. “But as an officer of the Galaxy Police, if there is truly an innocent life at stake, then I must do my duty and hear you out. Even if it pains me to allow you within these walls once more… I have sworn an oath to uphold justice and peace in the Universe. An oath which some of us take more seriously than others.”

Seiryo flinched at the censure in his companion’s tone, biting his lip, but he made no attempt to reply. Instead he followed the other man along the familiar hallways towards the corridor which housed the offices of central command. As they passed groups of young officers, Seiryo found he was under scrutiny, and he heard several whispers as he passed by. He sighed, inwardly hating the sudden attention, and he was glad when they reached their destination.

“Take a seat.” The Commander gestured to an empty chair on the far side of the desk. “And remember what I have said. I do not like this, Lord Tennan. I do not wish to see Detective Makibi further upset.”

“I have no intention of doing anything to upset Detective Makibi.”

Seiryo said quietly. “Contrary to your belief, Commander, attacking young women is not a natural part of my behaviour. My record before my exposure to dark magic should tell you that much… you seem to have easily forgotten the agent that I was, before I fell under the lure of something I could not control.”

The Commander’s eyes narrowed, but he did not reply. Instead he leant across his desk, flipping the switch on his intercom.

“Detective Kiyone Makibi, First Class, report to the Commander’s office immediately.” He said, his tone brisk and a touch impatient. “Kiyone Makibi, please attend the Commander’s office immediately. Thank you.”

“I’m glad to find she’s not on patrol. I didn’t see the Yagami as I flew in.” Seiryo observed.

“That is noone of your business.” The Commander snapped, resting his arms on the desk. “This whole business is well beyond my liking. It’s not for Jurai to come and demand the individual services of a particular Detective — especially a Detective of the regular division. And as for your presence here…”

“Believe me, sir, I could not feel more unwelcome.” Seiryo said frankly. “I will be glad to leave, also. As soon as I’ve spoken to Detective Makibi.”

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and as the Commander called the visitor in, Seiryo got to his feet, meeting Kiyone’s startled gaze with a rueful one of his own.

“Seiryo?” She murmured, then, “Commander, you sent for me?”

“Yes.” The Commander looked troubled, gesturing to his companion. “I’m sorry, Kiyone. I know that you’d probably rather not be put in this position. But Lord Tennan has come here from Jurai with a commission for you specifically. Apparently it relates to a friend of yours and of the Princesses of Jurai.”

“A commission?” Interest sparked Kiyone’s pretty blue eyes, and she entered the office proper, closing the door behind her with a soft click. “But I don’t understand… what kind of commission?”

“Washu has disappeared, and Princess Sasami is very concerned about her well-being. As am I.” Seiryo said frankly. “Your Commander seems unwilling to entertain the possibility, but I hoped that I might ask for your assistance in trying to find her. After all, in many ways, you know Washu better than I do. And the more help available, the sooner I can tell Tokimi that her sister is safe.”

“I see.” Kiyone’s expression became grave. “And you came all the way here to get me?”

“Well, that was the intention, although the Commander seems to think you might object to the idea.” Seiryo’s voice was rich with irony, and Kiyone flushed red.

“You can hardly blame him. You didn’t exactly leave a great impression at Headquarters.” She said acidly.

“Kiyone, you are well within your rights to refuse Jurai’s commission.” The Commander interjected quietly at that moment. “Given the circumstances, I would back your decision fully.”

Kiyone frowned, shaking her head.

“I know what you’re thinking, sir, but it’s quite all right. Really.” She said with a shrug of her shoulders. “When you seconded me to Jurai, Seiryo-sama and I crossed paths a few times. He and I… there’s no longer any ill feeling between us. We were both victims of the same evil magic, and that’s all. And if Washu is in trouble… well, Washu has been there for enough of us over the past few years. Commander, I’d like to help, if I may. If my current duties can be… well, postponed. I’d like to go with S… with Lord Tennan and see if I can help.”

Surprise flickered into the Commander’s expression, and he glanced briefly from Detective to nobleman.

“Are you sure about that?” He asked at length. Kiyone met Seiryo’s gaze, then nodded her head.

“I can handle one arrogant Juraian peer.” She said off-handedly. “I’d be quite safe, Commander. Really.”

“Then I suppose I cannot stand in your way. Not given the fact he carries the seal of the Princess Sasami.” The Commander said with a sigh, rubbing his temples. “If you are really certain you want to do this, then I will release you from your current investigations. I can assign them to someone else, in the meantime. In the circumstances, that’s all I can do.”

“I appreciate it, sir.” Seiryo said solemnly. “Jurai is in your debt.”

“Yes, well, I’m not happy about it.” The Commander said darkly. “And if I hear you’ve hurt her again — even a little bit — Lord Tennan, I don’t care who your family are. I take the protection of my people very, very seriously, and I will push Jurai for justice.”

“You needn’t worry about that.” Seiryo said simply. “I have no

desire to harm Detective Makibi. I happen to consider her a very fine detective… and I hope that with her help, this matter may be solved as soon as possible."

The Commander sighed heavily, gesturing to the door.

"Then go." He said frankly. "Kiyone, you too. I expect a full report, when you return. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." Kiyone nodded her head, saluting her Commander as she did so. "Thank you."

"Well, he was very warm and welcoming, I must say." As they withdrew from the office, Kiyone shutting the door behind her, Seiryo shot his friend a rueful grimace. Kiyone snorted.

"You have a lot of nerve even coming here, knowing the way people feel about you." She said bluntly. "Washu must have got herself into a lot of trouble for you to risk it."

"It isn't just that." Seiryo shook his head. "Look, I have the Unko parked not far from here. I'd like to get back there as soon as I can — Tokimi is there alone at present, and…"

"You brought *Tokimi* along with you?" Kiyone's eyes widened in shock. Seiryo nodded.

"It's a long story." He said heavily. "And I'll explain on the way. But she shouldn't be on the ship alone — she's not used to space travel. I would have brought her here with me, but I expected a frosty reception. She's so intuitive to people's emotions — I thought it might affect her more, surrounded by so much hostility."

"Probably. You really aren't the Commander's favourite person." Kiyone said frankly. "All right. I'm coming. Just let me grab some things from my room, and I'll be with you… it won't take a moment."

"All right." Seiryo nodded his head. "That makes sense — I appreciate you coming at such short notice."

"Well, Washu was the one who saved my life, after you tried to kill me." Kiyone said with a careless shrug. "So in a way, I owe her this favour."

"Kiyone?"

As they reached the end of the hallway, a voice called Kiyone's name, and the detective turned, consternation in her expression as she registered the speaker. She cursed under her breath, and Seiryo followed her line of sight, seeing the familiar figure of her blond-

haired partner hurrying along the corridor towards them. At the sight of Seiryo she stopped dead, her blue eyes becoming huge as she absorbed his presence.

"What are *you* doing here?" She demanded, pushing herself between him and Kiyone and holding up her hands. "I won't let you hurt Kiyone again, so go away!"

"Detective Kuramitsu… it's a pleasure." Seiryo said drolly, bowing his head in acknowledgement of her presence, and Mihoshi scowled, her brows drawing together as she gazed at him.

"I mean it." She said firmly. "You're a bad man and you shouldn't be here."

"Miho, it's all right. It's fine." Kiyone shook her head, putting a hand on her friend's arm. "Seiryo and I are friends now… it's all behind us."

"But he… he tried to kill you, Kiyone!" Mihoshi protested. Kiyone nodded.

"He was under a spell when he did. It wasn't his fault." She said simply. "He didn't want to do it. When I was on Jurai, we talked things over and we became friends. Really, he's not going to hurt either of us. That was just bad magic. Nothing else."

"Really?" Mihoshi eyed Seiryo cautiously, and Seiryo nodded.

"I would never harm your friend, Detective." He said solemnly. "I have a lot of respect for her, and I am ashamed that anything ever compelled me to do such a thing."

"You were possessed?" Mihoshi tilted her head on one side, and Seiryo nodded again.

"I was." He agreed. "But I am recovered now. You have nothing to fear from me."

"You poor thing." Mihoshi's expression had changed in a split second, and Seiryo faltered at the sympathetic smile that she now bestowed on him. "It must have been so horrible for you, going through all of that. But you're all better now? Really? You're okay?"

"I'm fine." Despite himself, Seiryo smiled. "And I appreciate your kindness, Detective."

"I'm going to be away from Headquarters for a few days, Mihoshi. Seiryo's asked for my help — Washu is in trouble." Kiyone said evenly. "I won't be away long, I'm sure — but I can't exactly refuse to

help.”

“Washu’s in trouble?” Mihoshi looked aghast, then, “Kiyone, we have to do something to help her!”

“Miho…”

“Well, you’re not going to leave me behind, are you?” Mihoshi put her hands on her hips. “We’re partners, remember? You and I, we work as a team!”

“Yes, I know that, but…” Kiyone faltered, and Seiryo grinned.

“Detective Kuramitsu, I would be most obliged to have your help in this matter, also.” He said softly. “But we are pressed for time. We must get to the Unko shortly — do you understand?”

“I’ll be there!” Mihoshi saluted smartly, nodding her head. “Come on, Kiyone — we have to help Washu!”

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

He had been gone a long time.

Tokimi sighed, pressing her hands up against the glass of the Unko's windscreen as she took in the glittering lights of the Galaxy Police Headquarters. It was big, she mused absently, but not like a planet, and somehow the sight of it unnerved her. At length she turned away, moving back towards the table and the discarded sheet of notepaper that still bore the characters for the Kii prayer.

She hesitated as she reached it, touching the edges with a tentative finger. Seiryo had scribbled some of his own comments on it, she realised, but she was unable to decipher the rough scrawl of his Juraian hand, and she frowned, shaking her head.

"It is not good." She whispered. "To write this, to say it… I wish I knew where you were, Washu-neechan. I'm scared. I don't like this!"

The sound of a door clanging made her start, and for a moment she thought her guardian had returned, but there were no footsteps along the Unko's walkway and she sighed, turning her attention back to the matter at hand.

"I wish I was still on Jurai." She admitted to herself out loud, tracing her finger-tip over the edges of the eagle sketch she had roughly drawn beside the written prayer. "Or Kihaku… with the Eagle. The World protected us — the Eagle always did. Why did you stop, Eagle-sama? Why did Kihaku die? I don't understand… why is it that Washu and I are alone now? And where is my sister? Tokimi is so confused."

She sank down into an empty seat, burying her head in her hands as she fought against the bewildering waves of fear that welled up inside of her. She hated being alone, isolated and abandoned in such a silent, alien place, and as she sat there, hoping against hope to hear Seiryo's comforting voice greeting her at any moment, other words and recollections flitted across her senses.

"*Your people never came to fight. They came to steal and destroy, just as you've come now. I've waited so many centuries to take my revenge on you, Tsunami, and you won't take that from me now! I will destroy a piece of you, just as your people destroyed Kihaku!*"

“Kihaku?”

Tokimi’s eyes snapped open, alarm flickering in their depths as she glanced around her for a speaker. “But… who… did *Tokimi* say those things? Tokimi… when she was… where? When? How? I don’t understand. *I don’t understand!*”

This last she shouted across the empty ship solar, gaining no comfort from the echo of her words as they rebounded back on her, almost taunting her ragged senses.

“*Kihaku suffers even now from the wounds your people inflicted on it.*”

The voice echoed through her once again, and as the words resonated against Tokimi’s senses, the tones harsh and unfamiliar to her ears, she almost thought she saw the shadow of eagle’s wings spreading out around her body, flexing in the artificial light of the spacecraft’s inner chamber. “*It demands revenge and I will be the one to grant it its wish!*”

“No.” Tokimi got to her feet, frightened now. “No! Stop this! Stop doing this! What are these things… where are they coming from?”

“*I will not be fooled by the blood of Newcomers. I killed your ancestors, Princess Sasami, and I will kill you too, now I know what earthly form you really take*.”

“No!” Tokimi’s scream echoed out around her as she sank to her knees, clapping her hands firmly over her ears as she screwed her eyes shut. “No! Stop! Stop making me see these things! Tokimi is scared. Tokimi is scared! I’ve had enough — I don’t understand! Stop it… *stop* it! Why am I seeing these things? *Why?”*

There was no answer, and as Tokimi cautiously opened her eyes, she realised that she was still quite alone, the forbidding shadow of the Eagle’s wings nothing more than a brief flash of imagination.

“But that voice.” She whispered, slowly lowering her hands to her sides as she tried to stop herself from shaking. “It was… it was Tokimi’s voice. Tokimi said those words? Tokimi… Tokimi… did those things? Is Tokimi… evil? Is that why… why Washu-neechan went away?”

“Tokimi?”

The sound of Seiryo’s voice from the outer hallway startled her and she turned around in time to see the door slide back, revealing the nobleman. She let out a murmur of relief, stumbling forward in search of comfort, but as he entered the chamber, Tokimi realised that her

adored adoptive brother was not alone. Two women were with him, and as she glanced at each one of their faces, a cold chill washed through her heart.

She faltered, biting her lip as strange pictures flashed across her thoughts, confusing and disorientating her.

"*Kiyone Makibi*."

The name flitted across her senses, pronounced with the firm intonation of Galactic Tongue, but this time Tokimi knew beyond all doubt that the voice was hers.

"*You must stop her, Seiryo. Eliminate her, if you must — but she must not be allowed to relay what she knows to her contacts on the Earth*."

"Nii-chan?"

Tokimi's eyes became big with fear and she took a step back, slowly shaking her head. "Tokimi… Tokimi…"

"Toki-chan, what's the matter?" Seiryo frowned, hurrying towards her. "I know I was a long time — I'm sorry. I realise you don't like being aboard the Unko. But it's all right now. You remember Detective Makibi, don't you? And Detective Kuramitsu, her partner, too? They're going to help us — they're friends of Washu's, and they want to assist us in our search."

"Hi, Tokimi." Kiyone offered her a warm smile, holding out her hands in a friendly gesture of greeting. "It's been a while since I saw you on Jurai — you're obviously a lot fitter than you were then, else Seiryo wouldn't be bringing you on a trip like this, would he?"

"Kiyone… san." Tokimi whispered, then. "I… I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

"Sorry for what?" Seiryo faltered, looking confused. "Tokimi, is something wrong? You look scared out of your wits — did something happen while I was speaking to the Commander?"

"She's probably space-sick. Or maybe she's hungry." Mihoshi stepped forward, eying the young Kii critically. "She's kind of pale — do you let her in the sun on Jurai? She looks a funny colour to me. I guess she probably *is* hungry — I know I am. We're going to be missing dinner at this rate — no wonder she's so stressed out."

"*If you continue to prattle on in such a way, Detective Kuramitsu, I will terminate you here and now. Once and for all… do you hear me! It will not be an easy death, if you anger me, so think carefully before you speak to me of things you don't understand!*"

Tokimi stared at Mihoshi, her eyes becoming big with horror and alarm as the voice came unbidden to her senses once again. She let out a strange sound, almost like a strangled sob as she turned on her heel, fleeing for the safety of her chamber.

“Tokimi!” Seiryo called her name, and Tokimi could hear the anxiety and concern in his tone, but she did not turn back, slipping into the chamber and banging the door shut. She leant up against it, breathing hard as the tears began to spill down her face. Sinking to the floor, she gave into her emotions, burying her head in her arms as her fright and confusion got the better of her.

“I don’t understand what it means.” She whispered. “But… but Tokimi said those things. Why? Why do I feel so cold, whenever I hear it? Is it a spell? A bad dream? Is the Eagle angry because I wrote down the prayer? But the Eagle… Kihaku is dead. Is the Eagle dead too? And Washu — where is Washu? If I could see her… if she was here, she could tell me what’s happening. Washu… Washu-neechan is smart. She’d know the answers. I know she would.”

“Tokimi?” There was a knock at the door, startling her, and she jumped, shuffling around as if expecting the steel panel to slide back of its own accord.

“Tokimi, it’s Seiryo. Please, let me in. If you’re upset, I want to help you.”

The concern in his voice ripped through Tokimi’s bewildered emotions and fresh tears welled in her eyes, spilling down her cheeks.

“Nii-chan.” She whispered. “I feel so strange.”

“Tokimi, please. Let me in!” Now Seiryo sounded frightened, and Tokimi hesitated, then lifted her hand to touch the door lock button. The door hissed and whirred back, revealing her travel companion, and without a word he scooped her up in his arms, hugging her tightly as he carried her gently towards the bed.

“I’m so sorry.” He said softly, laying her carefully down on the covers. “You’re upset, you’re frightened and I’ve dragged you far from home, haven’t I? Suki was right — you weren’t ready for this. I should turn back — take you home to Jurai. Shouldn’t I?”

“Nii-chan.” Tokimi buried her head in his shoulders, shaking with the tears, and gently he stroked her hair, his touch somehow soothing her frazzled senses.

“Is that what you want me to do? To take you home?” He asked quietly. Tokimi raised her gaze to his, shaking her head as she met his

concerned malachite eyes with her own troubled sapphire ones.

“I need to help Washu-neechan.” She said unevenly. “Tokimi needs… to speak to her sister. About… about Kihaku.”

“But if the flight is going to upset you this much…”

“Tokimi is fine.”

“You know you make a terrible liar, and I don’t believe you for one moment. I doubt very much you got any sleep when you came here to take your nap earlier, did you?”

Tokimi flushed, looking uncomfortable. Slowly she shook her head, and Seiryo sighed.

“I had a feeling about that. Something is on your mind, and I wish you’d share it with me.”

There was a moment of silence, then Tokimi shook her head again.

“Tokimi just… Tokimi loves Nii-chan.” She said softly. “I want… I want to stay with you. Please, Nii-chan… let me stay with you?”

“Well, if that’s really what you want.” Seiryo looked doubtful. “I just don’t like seeing you unsettled like this. It’s upsetting for me too, you know. I worry about you — you’re my responsibility, after all. Suki won’t forgive me if I let anything bad happen to you.”

“Tokimi wants to stay with Nii-chan.” Tokimi repeated decidedly. “Don’t leave me again… not like Washu-neechan. I don’t… I don’t want to be alone again.”

“I promise.” Seiryo assured her. “Next time I leave the ship, I’ll take you with me. All right?”

“All… all right.”

“Tokimi, what did you mean, when you said you were sorry?”

Tokimi bit her lip, her eyes clouding over.

“Nothing.” She whispered. “It was… it was nothing.”

“But…”

“Tokimi is fine, Nii-chan.” Tokimi pulled back from his embrace, sending him a look that, had she but known it, belied her words completely. “Tokimi wants to find Washu. Soon. Please. We must.”

“Yes, we must.” Seiryo sighed, getting to his feet. “All right. But you get some rest. If you want something to eat, I’ll make sure that

there's something for you when you're ready. But you look pale and exhausted. We've got some flying to do yet, after all — so will you take the chance to get some sleep?"

Tokimi sighed, but nodded her head.

"Yes." She said quietly. "Tokimi will… will sleep."

"Okay." Seiryo looked relieved, nodding his head. "And if you need me, you know where I am, all right?"

"All right."

Seiryo paused, eying her for a moment. Then he turned on his heel, leaving the chamber and shutting the door with a soft click.

Once he was gone, Tokimi flopped down on her pillows, closing her eyes as she struggled to work out what it was she was feeling.

"Nii-chan… Kiyone-san… Detective Mihoshi." She whispered. "Why do I see such horrible things? What is wrong with me? What *is* Tokimi? *Did* I say those things? *Do* those things? Or… or what? If Nii-chan knew… would he hate me? Would he leave me alone forever? Is this what he and Suki meant — if they saw the things in my mind, would they not *want* Tokimi any more?"

"Is she all right?"

As Seiryo rejoined the two detectives in the ship solar, Kiyone glanced up from her chair, offering Seiryo a quizzical glance. "No, I can tell by your expression — she's not all right, is she?"

"I wish I knew." Seiryo said helplessly, sinking down into a vacant seat. "She says she wants to keep looking for Washu. I asked if she wanted me to take her home, but she didn't want that… so I don't know what else to do."

"Tokimi's mind is broken though, right?" Mihoshi furrowed her brow as she thought things over. "I mean, she was hurt, wasn't she? After she went nuts and all, and made you attack Kiyone. Tsunami — Sasami — she said that Tokimi wouldn't hurt anyone again… but her head was pretty messed up. So isn't that the reason she's acting oddly now? She's not normal like the rest of us."

"Tokimi is…" Seiryo hesitated, then shook his head. "No. Mihoshi-san, I appreciate what you're trying to say, but I don't think that's it. Tokimi is impaired, but she's not crazy. And she's not given to violent emotional outbursts. Yet when I went in there, she'd been crying. It's

twice in a matter of days and I don't like it. In fact, ever since Sasami-sama had her vision and wrote down that prayer, she's been unlike herself."

"Is this the prayer?" Kiyone scooped up the discarded sheet of paper, glancing at the symbols. Seiryo nodded, coming to stand behind her as she pored over the strange words. "I'm guessing it's in Kii… yes?"

"Yes." Seiryo confirmed. "She didn't like writing it down. I think… it has some superstitious meaning to her, because it has to do with death rituals and funerary rites. It's got to her, that's for sure. Maybe she believes Washu is dead — I don't know. But I don't really like it."

"Well, if she doesn't want to go home, what can you do?" Kiyone shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe she's a bit spooked, but I guess she knows better than anyone what she can and can't handle. It's that whole saving the world complex again, Seiryo… Tokimi is the best judge of her own capabilities. Even impaired, you should probably trust her to make that decision."

"Yes, I know." Seiryo sighed heavily. "But I have Suki to answer to. And it won't be pretty, if she finds out how wound up Tokimi is."

"Suki is your sister, right?" Mihoshi looked startled. "I thought you were the bossy one in your family — is your sister even worse than you are, then?"

"Miho!" Kiyone's eyes opened wide in dismay, and Seiryo started, then smiled, shaking his head ruefully.

"You speak as you find, Detective, don't you?" He observed wryly. "Yes, now I can see why it is you and Kiyone have such a positive working partnership. Neither one of you seeks to conceal your feelings from the other — I shall have to become accustomed to this plain detective speak if we are to work together finding Washu."

"Oh, get off your high horse." Kiyone sounded impatient. "You're doing that whole thing again, when you let your Juraian ego get the better of you and you get all condescending and superior. Stop it, and do something useful, huh? You did tell me the other ni… one time that you used to cook for yourself when you were on missions. If you like, I'll give you a hand — but Mihoshi isn't the only one that's hungry and Tokimi might feel better after she has had something to eat."

"Kiyone, are you supposed to be rude to Juraian Lords?" Mihoshi looked doubtful. "I mean, even if they did used to be Police Agents?"

“He tried to kill me, so it’s open season.” Kiyone said frankly. “I have carte blanche to be as rude to him as I like, Mihoshi.”

“Oh.” Mihoshi frowned. “What about me?”

“As I understand it, Detective Kuramitsu, you’re essentially a Seniwan Lady yourself.” Seiryo said lightly. “Your father and I are acquainted, you know — he was a very fine teacher, when I was at the Galaxy Police Academy. Although I’m sure you have better manners than your partner… please, feel free to address me by my given name. In a sense, we are social equals, after all.”

“Bah.” Kiyone shot him a dark look, getting to her feet and flouncing across the living area towards the small, compact kitchen. Despite himself, Seiryo chuckled.

“Touche, I think.” He murmured, meeting Mihoshi’s confused gaze with his own warm one. “Well, Mihoshi-san — is it acceptable to you, if we stick to first name terms while aboard this ship?”

“Oh, for sure.” Mihoshi’s face cleared and she nodded her head. “After all, I don’t care about all of that Lord and Lady stuff anyway. It’s all too confusing, remembering who is cousin to what and all that. That’s why I wanted to be like Father and join the Galaxy Police. I don’t care who I’m friends with, you know?”

She grinned.

“Don’t mind Kiyone. She’s a bit crabby because she’s hungry and worried about Washu.” She added confidentially. “She’s not always so snappy — I’m sure she’ll cheer up when we’ve eaten.”

“I heard that, Mihoshi!” Kiyone’s voice came from the kitchen, and Seiryo laughed.

“I should go help her.” He decided. “Mihoshi — do me one favour, please, while I am busy cooking?”

“Yes?” Mihoshi looked startled.

“If Tokimi comes out of her room, please let me know. And be kind to her.” Seiryo said simply. “I know you’re kindhearted — Kiyone’s told me so. And I’m sure that a little of that will go a long way. She’s sensitive, and I admit, I’m not always the best one at seeing what she needs. So… if she does… will you do that for me?”

“Of course.” Mihoshi’s pretty face became grave, and she nodded her head resolutely. “It’s absolutely okay — you can count on me!”

“Yes, I’m sure I can.” Seiryo agreed. “Thank you… I appreciate it!”

“We’ve been around this same sector of space three times since we left Jiro’s bar.”

Tenchi sighed, sinking down onto the floor of the Ryo Ohki, leaning up against the jagged framework as he gazed helplessly out at the empty blackness that surrounded them. “What exactly are we looking for, Ryoko? I mean, you must have some idea — or are you just wheeling, hoping that something will show itself if you take it from every angle?”

“Honestly, I wish I knew.” Ryoko bit her lip, running her fingers loosely over Ryo Ohki’s control sphere as she turned the ship around for a fourth circuit of the sector. “Both Ryo Ohki and I are sure that we’re in the right place — Ryo Ohki’s racked her navigation records time and time again and each time she’s come up with the same coordinates — roughly. This sector is the right one. But where… I don’t see anything. And it’s driving me a little bit crazy, to be honest. How can a planet not be there? And more to the point, why was it that Washu was able to find it so easily?”

“I have a thought about that.” Tenchi admitted, turning his gaze to her as he made himself more comfortable. “I mean, I thought about it, and what Jiro said, about the fact none of these pirates ever saw the planet when it appeared on their scanners. That’s weird in itself, right?”

“Yes, more than.” Ryoko agreed, resting her arms on the control panel as she eyed him keenly. “So what’s your idea? How do you explain that little phenomenon?”

“I don’t. Or at least, I don’t know why they couldn’t see it.” Tenchi pursed his lips. “But what if Washu *could* see it because she’s Kii, Ryoko? You know that her Kii sight means she sees people’s true natures by just looking at them. And when I started thinking about it, I remembered that Tokimi and Washu both saw Yugi’s true form through her Sakuya disguise when they encountered her on Jurai. Yugi concealed herself completely from people’s view on occasion — but it didn’t fool the Kii sense of perception. What if that’s how Washu managed to see this planet? Because you can’t fox Kii sight as easily as you can the rest of the universe?”

“Kii sight!” Ryoko’s eyes widened, and she brought her hand down with a thump on the panel, causing her ship to let out a reproachful yowl. “Sorry, Ryo Ohki. I forgot where I was for a moment there. But Tenchi, you know, you might be right. Maybe that is it. Why didn’t I think of that before?”

“Because you’re tired and you’re worried about her.” Tenchi suggested gently. “We both know it. You didn’t get any sleep last night, not really — and I know you’re pretty hard-wearing, most of the time, but I also know that Washu’s fate is bothering you. Still, it’s a possibility, right?”

“Right.” Ryoko nodded, narrowing her gaze. “Which means, maybe, if I really, really focus, I might be able to see it too — right? I mean I didn’t see Yugi’s true form, when I looked at Sakuya. But I did pick up a bad vibe from her. Maybe, if I really, really concentrate, I’ll pick up a planetary vibe too. It’s worth a try if nothing else, right? I am half Kii, after all.”

“I guess it doesn’t hurt to try it. At least it’s something positive.” Tenchi nodded. “And you’ve said that before — that you sometimes pick up bad karma. Well, if this planet really is doing what you think, and sacrificing people, that’s got to be any amount of bad karma. Maybe you can pick it up.”

“It’s the best shot we have right now.” Ryoko admitted, stepping away from the ship’s control panel. “Ryo Ohki, can you handle your own navigation for a while? I want to really put all my mind to this. Even Zakari had more potent Kii sight than I’ve ever had, so I’m going to need all my concentration if I’m going to find this world.”

Ryo Ohki let out a mew of assent, and Ryoko moved across to the glass, pressing her palms against the cool surface as she gazed out across the bleak, empty expanse. For a while there was silence, then Ryoko clenched her fists, banging her brow against the thick crystal divide.

“It’s no good.” She said dispiritedly. “I just see blackness. Blackness and stars. Not even the faintest hint of a planet. Nothing.”

“I’m sorry.” Tenchi pulled himself to his feet. “It was worth a try.”

“Yeah.” Ryoko glanced at her hands. “I guess I’m just not Kii enough. I’m a mutt, when it comes to the crunch. Everything is mixed up inside of me… so I don’t really excel in any of the magics I inherited. It’s just one big mish-mash — right now that sucks. From what Ryo Ohki has said, Washu saw it without even having to look for it. It was just there, in her line of sight. But I can’t do what she can. It’s no use… I just can’t see it.”

“Ryoko, look!” Tenchi’s eyes widened, and he flung his arm out towards the space-scene outside the craft as Ryo Ohki made a wild lurch to the left, uttering an indignant howl of rage. Ryoko stumbled, grabbing hold of Tenchi’s arm as he fell almost headlong, narrowly

missing colliding with the sharp edges of Ryo Ohki's inner drive room, and as they struggled to right themselves, they became aware of the glinting hull of a silver ship drawing slowly alongside them.

"Seiryo Tennan!" Ryoko clenched her fists, electricity sparking across her fingers as she recognised the cause of the disturbance. "Space hog! Why the hell doesn't he look where he's going — and what does he think he's doing, anyway?"

"Probably the same thing as we are." Tenchi pulled himself into a more upright position, even as his companion banged her hand down on the communication button, making a connection to the other ship. The screen flickered and blurred into life, revealing the Juraian nobleman, and Ryoko put her hands on her hips.

"What the hell are you trying do do, get us all killed?" She demanded, before the man could utter a word. "I realise your ship is like an ugly silver meteor, and Ryo Ohki's a small craft in comparison, but that doesn't give you the right to try and barge us right out of the way! You could have caused a messy accident — and who'd be explaining to your Princess that you splatted members of her family all over the universe?"

"Ryoko-sama!" Seiryo blinked, then gathered his wits, holding his hands up in a gesture of conciliation. "I apologise. Unko was on auto-pilot, and I wasn't aware you were even in this sector. I have been otherwise engaged — and Ryo Ohki is a swift moving vessel. No doubt she moved into our path before my craft could make the necessary adjustments to change course."

"Don't blame Ryo Ohki for your stupid navigation errors." Ryoko bristled. "Why are you here, anyway? Are you looking for Washu here, too?"

"It seemed as good a place as any, to follow the coordinates you were on when I last spoke to you." Seiryo agreed evenly. "In the nearby vicinity to where Kihaku once was — this is where you believe Washu must be, correct?"

"Well, if she is, we've not found any trace of her." Tenchi came to stand beside his fiancee, biting his lip. "We're still having no luck. We spoke to an old friend of Ryoko's, and he mentioned having heard about a ghost planet of some nature in this sector. But Ryoko's sure that we're not dealing with spectral forces, not this time."

"I don't believe in ghosts, so I imagine not." Seiryo said frankly. "Yet this sector seems to be empty. The Unko has a very powerful scanner — but nothing is appearing on the radar. My ship is capable

of picking up idents and objects even through cloaking devices, so I would have thought, if it were here, I'd have found it by now."

"I wouldn't be so sure of your ship, if it can almost run over Ryo Ohki without you realising it." Ryoko muttered. "It, and you, are not infallible."

Seiryo sighed.

"Again, my apologies." He said evenly. "Honestly, I am more concerned with Washu's safety right at the moment. It isn't just Sasami and I who are concerned, after all. Tokimi is quite upset about the whole business. She's not been herself since we left Jurai."

"Tokimi is *with* you?" Tenchi's eyes opened wide, as inspiration suddenly hit him, and he pushed forward eagerly, resting his hands on the control panel as he met the startled noble's gaze with urgent brown eyes. "Is that what you just said?"

"Yes. She wanted to help Washu." Seiryo nodded, looking non-plussed. "As are Detectives Kiyone and Mihoshi, since I thought it might help to have the insight of the Galaxy Police. Particularly since they know Washu possibly better than I do."

"Forget Kiyone and Mihoshi for a moment." Tenchi shook his head impatiently, drawing a startled look from his fiancee as he did so. "Tokimi… could *she* see this planet?"

"Tokimi!" Ryoko's amber eyes lit up with comprehension. "Kii sight! Of course!"

"I'm afraid you've lost me." Seiryo looked blank. "What is it you think Tokimi might be able to do? How do you suppose she can see this world, if even the Unko's scanners cannot?"

"Because Tokimi is like Washu. She's a Kii." Tenchi said excitedly. "She has the same sight that Washu does — the same way of seeing things that are truly there, not the things that conceal them. Remember Yugi? Tokimi saw right through that, didn't she? And we're sure that Washu's Kii sight is the thing that made her able to see this planet that noone else can apparently see. Maybe Tokimi is what we need — perhaps she's the key to finding this place!"

"Of course!" Seiryo's expression cleared. Then he frowned.

"But still…" He said softly. "Tokimi is… quite upset by everything."

"You said she wanted to help Washu, didn't you?" Ryoko demanded. Seiryo nodded.

“Yes, I did, but she’s not quite like everyone else when it comes to things.” He said quietly. “You have to remember that, Ryoko. Tokimi is… different.”

“Still, if she could help, don’t you think she’d want to try? I mean, if we explained it to her?” Tenchi pressed. Seiryo shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know.” He owned. “But I concede that you make a good point. It may well be that Tokimi’s unusual vision can find what even the best of Juraian technology cannot.”

He frowned, then gestured to the ship behind him.

“It seems that we are bent on the same errand, and therefore we should work together.” He added. “I know the Ryo Ohki is a fast craft, and capable of crossing territory smoothly and swiftly without much effort on her part. But she cannot be a comfortable ship to travel in long-term, and Ryoko-sama, you look tired. Since we both seek the same thing, you should perhaps consider boarding the Unko. Kiyone and Mihoshi will be glad to see you, and we can better discuss strategies if we are all in the same place.”

“Come aboard your tin can ship?” Ryoko looked suspicious, but Tenchi nodded, casting his fiancee a sidelong glance as he did so.

“I think you’re right, Lord Tennan.” He said softly. “Ryoko, you know that he’s got a point. You said yourself how tired you were. This way, Ryo Ohki can take a break, too… and both of you need that, after the searching we’ve been doing. You didn’t sleep last night, and neither did she. Let’s do as he says, and go aboard the Unko. It’s better that we are all in one place, after all.”

Ryoko frowned, reticence flickering in her amber eyes, but at length she nodded, uttering a sigh.

“All right.” She said slowly. “But only because Ryo Ohki really does need a break. Not because I do. And because I want to find Washu, not because I want to work with anyone from Jurai.”

“Then I shall prepare the Unko for your boarding.” Seiryo said lightly. “And with any luck, we can work on bringing this whole matter to resolution.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

“You truly have turned this place into an underground habitat, haven’t you?”

As Mayuka led Washu deeper and deeper through the tunnels and passageways that ran like rabbit warrens beneath the surface of Rikishouki, the scientist sighed, running her fingers absently against the stone that surrounded her. “Mayuka, I understand your feelings, and I realise that you want to make me understand… something. But you’re not understanding what I’m trying to tell you. It doesn’t matter where we go or what you do. I’ve never been cut out to be Priestess of anywhere… and I’m really not who you think I am. My bloodline aside, I’m not worthy of carrying the hopes of your entire people.”

“Washu-sama.” Mayuka frowned, turning to face her companion. “There are a lot of things I don’t understand about this world and this life and all of the things that exist on Rikishouki. But one thing I do have faith in is the guidance of the Eagle. He brought our people here, to start a new life, free from Settler interference. He has protected and nurtured us for generations, and now, when we need his help, he has brought you to us. It’s not a coincidence that you came here. I don’t believe that it is. Why else would I have such visions and dreams about you, if he didn’t intend you to come to our aid? You’re fighting against the will of your own people’s deity… the being your family dedicated their lives to serving. Why are you so adamantly against helping us? I don’t understand.”

“Mayuka…”

Washu looked stricken as she absorbed the genuine emotion in her companion’s fuschia eyes, and Mayuka reached out to grab her by the hand, giving her a little tug in the direction of a crumbling archway. Washu followed her companion, finding herself in the centre of a small, domed chamber, not unlike the one Mayuka called her home. This one, however, was decked out in a completely different way, the ceilings rich with colours and despite herself Washu felt the same sense of nostalgia wash over her senses as she absorbed the images painted over her head. Along the walls, stone caskets carved with intricate details lay silent and still, and even as she approached them, Washu knew beyond doubt what they were.

“Holy tombs.” She murmured, her fingers twitching almost automatically into a Kii gesture of reverence before she knew what she was doing. She flushed, clasping her hands together tightly as she registered Mayuka’s gaze on her, and with some effort, she forced her hands back down at her sides.

“This is where they are all buried.” Mayuka settled herself down in the middle of the floor, crossing her legs as she gestured to the coffins around her. “The leaders of the tribes who brought us life on Rikishouki. Scribes of the Priests and Priestesses of Kihaku — our oldest ancestors. Their names are legends — they are revered almost as much as the Eagle itself. Even though Kihaku was dying, they believed that we had a future somewhere else. That the Eagle would never forsake us, and they fought for that purpose. Their remains lie here, blessed and revered for generations. These were the people who served your family, Washu-sama. The ones in whom the Priest and Priestess had faith. Do you turn your back on them, too?”

“Masoto of the Uematsu. Amari of the Daitokuji. Rei of the Ishihara.” Washu glanced from casket to casket, reading the names slowly and carefully aloud to herself. “All tribes I remember, but the given names… are new to me. I knew none of them.”

“Masoto was my ancestor.” Mayuka said softly. “He was once a Scribe of the Priest’s Work, and he led his people to freedom. Amari was his ally, his friend, and later, his wife. Through them, my family line was born. The tribes have mixed blood for generations, now. We no longer refer to ourselves in such a tribal way — I am simply Mayuka of Rikishouki, now. But this is his legacy to me. These people — they fought so that my family could govern Rikishouki in peace and tranquility. Then Yuzuha came… Washu-sama, don’t you understand? Our lives, our freedom, everything has been stripped from us since she came to our planet! We don’t have any special gifts, but I’ve read about the Hakubi. I know that, beyond the magic of the World, they were gifted with special powers and attributes. I’m sure you must be strong enough to help us defeat Yuzuha. The fact you even live, so many years since this all happened — isn’t that proof enough that you are close to the divine? Yuzuha has such a terrible hold over the people here… those who aren’t directly under her spell live in fear of her temper and her random acts of vengeance. You’re the only hope we have — that’s why the Eagle told me about you. He meant you to come here. To uphold the values that Masoto-sama and Amari-sama and their companions fought for, so many generations ago. They slew Settlers and freed our people — did they do it in vain?”

Washu’s eyes softened at this impassioned speech, taking in the

tears that glittered on Mayuka's lashes. Sitting herself down opposite the young girl, she frowned, resting her hands in her lap as she considered how to respond.

"My own father would have disowned me, you know." She said at length. "In some ways, maybe he did. Perhaps he didn't believe me dead — I'll never know. But I was written out of Kihaku's history by my own choice and by his. I never wanted to learn the things he thought I should. Even if it's true, what you say, about your people and about the Hakubi tribe carrying magic — I don't understand how to be a Priestess. I never have."

"I don't understand."

"No, and I don't know how to explain it to you." Washu sighed. "Tell me something. How is it that, if what you say is true, Yuzuha was able to come here and attack your way of life? It sounds like you've lived like this for centuries, bothering noone. How did she even know to come here?"

"Noone really knows why she chose this planet, but what I do know is that she was fleeing the wrath of a great Empire, when she came." Mayuka sighed, glancing at her hands. "She was pursued by demon ships from the planet known as Jurai — the one written so often in our own histories. We know about those Settler people, and the way they slew our ancient kinsfolk. Through them, our world was destroyed and left to dust. So when she came here, injured and in fear of her life, our people tended her. She, it seemed, had a common enemy. She had also suffered at the hands of the ones who slew that last true Priest of Kihaku."

She paused, meeting Washu's gaze head on.

"Your father." She added softly. Washu inclined her head in acknowledgement, gesturing for her companion to continue.

"To begin with, her true nature wasn't clear." Mayuka sighed. "Though really, I was too young to remember all this. I know only from the stories told me by Tadashi's family. Even he wasn't so very old — maybe five or six summers at most, when Yuzuha came to Rikishouki. As time went on, and she recovered her health, she grew in strength. Too late the people here realised that she wanted Rikishouki for her own — we did not know how to fight someone like her. We're not a warrior people, Washu-sama. Since the time when we came to this planet, our tribal blood has become so mixed that there are not even fights between different clans. We are all one people. Yes, individuals may have drawn blades or raised fists on each other,

but there were no widespread conflicts. Yuzuha took us all off guard. Before anyone knew what had happened, she had slain the entirety of the governing family. All… all but me.”

“You survived.” Washu said gently. “But you were a baby, correct?”

“I was two or three.” Mayuka nodded her head. “I don’t remember any of it. I have no recollection of my family or their death, even though I must have been there. I’ve always been with Tadashi and his family… he’s protected me still, even after his own people passed on. But… but I don’t like living like this. It’s living in fear. Running away. And I’m sick of doing it. I want… I want to avenge what she did to them, but more than that, it’s not vengeance I really want. It’s peace for Rikishouki. To bring my people back to how they were before. I don’t… I don’t want Rikishouki to end the same way as Kihaku did — at the mercy of Settlers with evil intent.”

“The death of Kihaku wasn’t entirely the fault of the Settlers.” Washu said sadly. “My sister, Tokimi, she controlled the power of Kihaku… her rages, they killed many people.”

“The World sought to cleanse itself of its betrayers… settlers and turncoat Kii alike.” Mayuka said simply. “Tokimi-sama did her duty by the World. That is all.”

“Is that what you believe?” Washu looked startled. Mayuka nodded.

“So it is told, in the histories left us by our ancestors.” She agreed gravely. “Tokimi-sama was not Hakubi, but still she did the World’s bidding.”

“I’ve never heard anyone describe such widespread slaughter and despair so simply before.” Washu frowned.

“Tell me, Washu-sama, why did you leave Kihaku?”

“Because I didn’t belong there.” Washu shrugged her shoulders. “As simple as that. I wanted a different life.”

“And now?” Mayuka grasped her fingers, eying her earnestly. “Even when you know our story, and all that goes on here? You do have power, I can tell you do. I can see it, when I look into your eyes. There are pictures, Washu-sama — pictures all over the underground world of Rikishouki. Engravings, carvings, paintings of the people that the Kii travellers left behind when they came to Rikishouki. I have seen the images of the Hakubi tribe. I have seen the Priest, with his flowing robes, his red hair, his green eyes. And I see his face reflected in yours.”

“Father is here?” Washu looked taken aback, and Mayuka nodded.

“His likeness, certainly.” She agreed.

“Will you take me there?”

“Of course.” Mayuka’s eyes flickered with hope, and she nodded again, getting to her feet. “It’s not far from here… this is the oldest part of the burial complex. Many people choose to be committed to flame these days. They believe it is a better way to greet the Eagle, since the core of this world is not the core of Kihaku. Where the Eagle is now, noone really knows.”

“In the hearts of the people who have faith in him, I imagine.” Washu said softly, allowing herself to be led through a connecting walkway to another domed chamber. This one was devoid of caskets, but as Mayuka gestured towards the furthest wall, the scientist let out a little gasp of surprise. There, rendered in the full glory that Kii artistry could manage, coloured in the same bright shades as the images in the other rooms was the figure of a man, dressed, as Mayuka had said, in long, flowing robes of blue-purple and teal, gathered at the waist with a thick bold sash of vibrant red. Hesitantly she stepped forward, taking in the smooth line of his body, and the distinctive symbol of the Hakubi inked in scarlet on the breast of his clothing. Sharp green eyes stared out across the chamber, the faint flecks of light the artist had given him making him almost alive. His red hair, tied in a tail behind his head, seemed to flow out behind him in some imaginary wind, and in his hand he held a staff, decorated at the top with the head of an eagle. The bird’s eyes were vivid sapphire, and the painter had gone to great troubles to emphasise the divinity of both the man and his carved cane. Spectral wings, their tips tinged with blue and silver spread out around the Priest’s body, seeming to wrap him in an ethereal glow, and Washu remembered absently Sasami’s account of her battle with Tokimi within Kihaku’s core.

“Tokimi-chan manifested eagle wings then, too.” She murmured. “Did Father call on that terrible power the day he defended his people against the Juraian attack? Is that how he died, wings unfurled, protecting the ones who couldn’t protect themselves?”

Behind the Priest’s form, Washu made out other people, grouped together by colour and symbol, and with a jolt she realised that these were the tribes of Kihaku, the peoples from whom the Kii survivors had been drawn. The landscape on which they stood jarred her memory, as she recalled standing atop the same bluff ledge as a small girl, staring out at the settlements and temples that littered the wild horizon. Tears touched her eyes and she crossed the chamber almost

in a dream, raising her fingers to touch the hand of the man who she had once called Father.

“Otousama.” She breathed. “As if he truly lived once more.”

“I knew he was.” Mayuka agreed, triumph in her fuschia eyes as she observed her companion’s reaction. “This image has been here since we’ve been on Rikishouki. It has never faded… it has been protected by the divine force of the Priest’s soul, of that we’ve always been sure.”

She tugged on her companion’s sleeve, gesturing to the furthest corner of the mural, and Washu let out a cry of surprise, her hand flying to her mouth as she registered what else had been painted on the soft stone wall.

“I never knew who they were, not exactly. That they would be watching the Priest so intently always made me wonder, but I was never sure.” Mayuka murmured. “The painting isn’t entirely clear — the way they are rendered makes them almost like shadows, not really there at all. But now I have no doubts. That’s Tokimi-sama, isn’t it? The Priestess who cleansed Kihaku? And that… that girl with her…”

“That’s me.” Washu sank down onto the floor before the image, running her finger lightly over the painting of the young woman. “Yes, there’s no doubt. Whoever painted this… he hadn’t written me out of Kii history as easily as Father might have liked. Even though I never met these people, Mayuka — they still knew about me. About my family — about the people who had ruled Kihaku since the dawn of time. And they thought to render us in paints here, even after the death of their entire world.”

Mayuka smiled.

“So now you understand?” She asked softly. “That you matter to this world, even if it isn’t Kihaku. Please, Washu-sama. We need you… we’ve needed you for so long. Now you’re here — you must know that the Eagle is still guiding your family’s fate. Your Father, he’s not there to protect us against our invaders — not this time. But you are… so please, will you help defeat Yuzuha? Will you help us return Rikishouki to freedom?”

Washu was silent for a moment. Then slowly she got to her feet, absently brushing the dust from her knees as she met Mayuka’s gaze with a faint smile.

“I suppose, given all of this, I have no choice.” She agreed. “Very well. If it means that much to you — and if you think I can really do

something to help. I will be your Priestess, Mayuka — at least until Yuzuha is brought down. And I will do my best to do all you ask of me — although in truth I have no idea where I should begin."

She glanced back at the mural, uttering a sigh.

"If nothing else, I owe my people that, for not forsaking my memory." She murmured, more to herself than her companion. "I betrayed Kihaku, and left it to burn. And yet, they still believed I would come. I suppose, given that… I can't refuse. I can't turn my back on my people a second time."

"Ryoko! Tenchi! Oh, it's so cool to see you!"

As Ryoko and her companions stepped into the Unko's central sitting area, Mihoshi leapt to her feet, sending the bowl of rice crackers that she had been keenly devouring tumbling over the arm of her seat and onto the floor. Kiyone let out a yelp, grabbing for the ceramic bowl and managing to right it before it too followed suit, but the action upset her balance, and she slipped onto the rug with a bump. Mihoshi faltered, staring at her friend in consternation.

"Hey, are you all right, Kiyone? You should really be more careful." She said, concern in her blue eyes. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"Mihoshi." Kiyone sighed, setting the bowl down on the table with a thump. She shook her head in resignation. "Never mind. There's just no point… I should have learnt that by now."

"Miho-Kiyo." Ryoko flashed both girls a smile, crossing the floor to join them as she hauled Kiyone to her feet. "Seiryo said that you were aboard, although I'm a little surprised to find you both here. I know that you worked with him to help put Yugi away, Kiyone, but even so…"

"Well, Washu did save my life, on at least one occasion." Kiyone said simply. "So it seemed the right thing to do."

"And I'm here to help, because Kiyone and I work best as a team." Mihoshi added. "It's so cool to see you both! Are you well? Tenchi, I think your hair's grown since last time I saw you. Are you trying to make yourself look like the statue of Prince Yosho or something? It's kinda spooky."

"Grown?" Tenchi looked discomfitted, fingering his hair absently. "No, I don't think so. I don't look that much like Grandpa — do I?"

"It's hard to tell. Katsuhito-dono is too much of a fossil these days

to really know." Ryoko said with a shrug. She sighed, watching as Ryo Ohki darted down onto the spaceship floor, sniffing at the scattered rice crackers as she nibbled at one or two. "Ryo Ohki, that's disgusting. Don't you have any manners at all? They're all over the floor — who knows whose big ugly boots have been pacing through this room?"

Ryo Ohki raised penitent amber eyes to her mistress, and Ryoko sighed.

"Okay, I know. You're tired and hungry. Me too." She acknowledged. "But right now, there are other things on my mind."

"Seiryo told us what you'd suggested, Tenchi. He's gone to speak to Tokimi about it." Kiyone said, settling herself back in her seat. "I don't know what she'll say about it, though. Just our coming here — Mihoshi and I — seems to have driven her into her chamber. I don't know why that should be — when I saw her on Jurai, she was open and friendly and she didn't seem to be afraid of me. But she stared at me as if she'd seen a ghost, this time. It was unnerving. I don't quite know how to explain it."

"I told you, Kiyone. Tokimi's brain isn't normal, that's all." Mihoshi shrugged, sitting back down and glancing around her in confusion. "Hey, where did those crackers go — did we eat them all already?"

"I swear, Mihoshi, you're not one to be talking about normal brains." Kiyone sighed, rubbing her temples. Tenchi smiled.

"With any luck, Tokimi's uniqueness might actually help in this case. She does have Kii sight, we know that." He said. "So if she can be coaxed out to help, we might be able to find where Washu has got to."

"Well, it sounds like a plan at least." Kiyone admitted.

"I bet your Commander was thrilled when Mr Jurai turned up at Headquarters and demanded your assistance." Ryoko remarked off-handedly. "I can only imagine his reaction. It'd be like if I showed up and asked to see one of you — I can't imagine he's number one on the invite list when there's a big social function."

"That's an understatement." Kiyone looked rueful. "He was a bit put out, and I could tell he didn't want me to go with Seiryo… but that's all behind us now and besides, I am a professional. Helping people in trouble is sort of my job, and my own preferences really don't come into it. Washu is in trouble. It's Mihoshi and my job to help her — simple as that, really."

“I knew you were too smart to have suddenly decided to like that guy.” Ryoko smirked. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who thinks he’s way too sweet on his own opinions.”

“Rich people are often like that, though.” Mihoshi said seriously. “It’s why I don’t like them very much. They’re really boring and Father hates it when I fall asleep at family functions. So I just don’t go to them any more… it’s really all so stupid, anyway.”

“That’s right. Mihoshi, your family are Seniwan nobility, aren’t they?” Tenchi remembered. Mihoshi nodded, dimpling.

“Yes, but we’re not all funny like that. You can ask Kiyone.” She said off-handedly. “She’s met my parents and my brother. We’re not stuck up and rude, are we, Kiyo?”

“No, the Kuramitsu family are certainly something else.” Kiyone returned the smile with an amused one of her own. “But stuck up and rude — definitely not.”

“Exactly.” Mihoshi looked satisfied. “Mother always says that being friends is more important than being important. Or, well, something like that.”

“If you two are hungry, by the way, there may be some food left over from our meal in the Kitchen area, just beyond there.” Kiyone raised her hand, gesturing towards the back of the chamber. “I kept a fair bit back, because Tokimi wouldn’t come out to eat and I thought she might be hungry later. We can always make something fresh for her, though, if she changes her mind. Seiryo might be arrogant and Juraian, but he does actually know how to cook — and Tokimi seems to be the best one at getting him to do as she wants, so no doubt he’ll be glad to do something, if she asks.”

“Food?” Ryoko’s eyes lit up, then, “Thanks, Kiyo. We’ve not eaten much at all today, if anything at all, really. Ryo Ohki’s not the only one famished… if you don’t mind, we’ll take you up on that.”

“Help yourself.” Kiyone grinned. “As I said, it’s all through there. And it should still be warm — we only ate just before Seiryo made contact with Ryo Ohki.”

“You mean, just before he almost splatted her.” Ryoko grimaced.

“Well, you know what male drivers are like.” Kiyone’s eyes twinkled with humour. “The showier the spacecraft, the worse the pilot inside, or isn’t that how the story goes?”

“I heard that, Kiyone.” Seiryo emerged from Tokimi’s chamber at

that moment, sending the detective a rueful smile, which she returned in kind. “Tenchi-sama, Ryoko-sama, welcome aboard. And Ryo Ohki, my sincere apologies to you as well, I’m sure. It was not my intention to cut so close across your path.”

Ryo Ohki abandoned the cracker she had been gnawing at, flicking her ears as she gazed up at him plaintively.

“She wants to know if you keep carrots aboard this spaceship.” Ryoko said with a sigh, and Seiryo nodded.

“The kitchen. Kiyone, if you wouldn’t mind helping our friends with refreshments?” He asked.

“No problem.” Kiyone agreed. “Is Tokimi coming out?”

“Tokimi wants to help find Washu-neechan.” Tokimi herself answered the question, slipping out of the chamber behind her companion and nodding her head resolutely. “If Tokimi can see the place, Tokimi will look. And then we can find Washu and go home, yes? Then it will… it will all be all right again.”

“That’s what we hope, Tokimi, yes.” Seiryo nodded his head. “It might just be that your special Kii sight can help us find Washu.”

“Then Tokimi must.” Tokimi said resolutely, moving across the chamber towards the spaceship’s wide perspex windows. “Is it out there? Is that where Tokimi should look?”

“We’re not entirely sure what we’re looking for, to be honest.” Tenchi admitted. “Tokimi-san, I know it’s a lot to expect of you. But we think Washu saw the planet without having to look too hard for it. Just look outside and tell us, well, tell us what you see.”

Tokimi started at the sound of his voice, turning to face him with a mixture of confusion and consternation.

“Prince Tenchi of Jurai.” She whispered. “Why are you here, too?”

“Tenchi and Ryoko have come to help too — isn’t it great, Tokimi?” Mihoshi explained. “Now I know we’ll find her super-fast, and with his bird wing thingies, I’m sure noone will be able to get in our way.”

“Bird wings.” Tokimi’s blue eyes clouded, then, “Hawk wings… Tsunami’s wings?”

“What do you mean, Tokimi?” Seiryo looked confused, and Tokimi stared at him, as if he had startled her out of some recollection. She shook her head, turning back towards the window.

“Nothing.” She said absently. “I have to look for Washu now. It

doesn't matter."

"Tokimi-chan, if something is on your mind…"

"Tokimi is fine." Tokimi said firmly, then, "Nii-chan, is it that planet you're looking for? The one with the glowing white shadow?"

"Glowing white… shadow?" Seiryo blinked, and Tokimi nodded, gesturing out across the bleak expanse.

"That one." She said seriously. "There. With the white light all around it."

"Can a shadow be white?" Mihoshi looked confused. Kiyone shrugged.

"I guess it can, in space." She reasoned, but there was a doubtful expression in her eyes.

"Tokimi, you can see a planet?" Tenchi asked softly. "There's something out there — something you can see clearly as another world?"

Tokimi looked surprised, nodding her head.

"It's right there." She agreed. "Can't you see it, Prince Tenchi?"

"No, I can't." Tenchi admitted. "None of us can — Tokimi, that's why we need your help so much. If you can see it, do you think you can tell us exactly where it is?"

"It's right out there, just on that side." Tokimi's brow furrowed in confusion. "It's very clear. Nii-chan, do you see it? It's there… do you know where Tokimi means?"

"I still only see stars." Seiryo admitted. "You need to be very precise, Tokimi. If you see something, it stands to reason that it is where Washu is being held prisoner. And that means we have to land there — somehow."

"But… I don't know how to explain." Tokimi looked sad. "It's just there. I see it. It's there. Why can't Nii-chan see it? I don't understand."

"Because people with normal eyesight can't, Tokimi." Kiyone said gently. "You're a Kii, so you're special. You can see things that other people can't… you know that, don't you? You can see things inside people, and I guess you can see through planet's cloaks, too. It makes you special, like Washu — that's why Seiryo wanted you to come with him, among other things."

“Tokimi is… special?” Tokimi’s eyes became big and a glimmer of a smile touched at her lips. “Kiyone-san, you think Tokimi is special?”

“Sure.” Kiyone looked startled. “Why? Is that a problem?”

“You don’t hate Tokimi?”

“Why would I hate Tokimi?” Kiyone was bewildered now, and Tokimi shook her head.

“Doesn’t matter.” She said simply. “Tokimi will try to help Nii-chan and Kiyone-san and everyone to get to the planet… somehow. If Tokimi is special, Tokimi must help!”

“Now that’s more like the girl I know.” Seiryo grinned at her. “I’m not sure how we’re going to manage this, without the Unko’s scanner picking it up — but I’m game to try, if you can be the ship’s eyes.”

“Where exactly do you see it, Tokimi?” Ryoko materialised at Tokimi’s side at that moment, startling the girl as she did so. The pirate sent her companion an apologetic smile, gesturing out towards space.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to make you jump.” She said off-handedly. “Tell me where you’re looking, Tokimi. I want to see if I can see it, now I know where I’m looking.”

“It’s there.” Tokimi pointed. “There, beyond the big glowing star and below the two stars that look like little diamonds.”

“Ryoko? Do you see anything, now?” Tenchi came up behind her, and Ryoko frowned, pressing her face close to the perspex as she focused on the area that Tokimi had indicated. At length she let out an exclamation, swinging around and grabbing her fiance by the hands.

“I see it!” She yelled, triumph in her golden eyes. “It’s faint — just a shadow, and I’d never have seen it without Tokimi’s help. But now I know where I’m looking — I can just about make out an outline, set against the night sky. It’s about forty five degrees north east, Seiryo — towards the boundary of this sector and the next. Let’s get to the Unko’s drive room — I think I can figure some rough coordinates and then we can go get my stupid mother back. That’s where she is, I’m sure of it! That’s where Washu is and we’re going to go get her back!”